Acknowledgments

This report was made possible by the 750+ frontline peacebuilders who work to build peace every day across the 35 countries where Search and its partners work, alongside the hundreds of partners, stakeholders, and people who have taken part in a global community of peacebuilders. Their lived experiences and expert observations were crucial to developing this report and measuring the impact of peacebuilding work. This report was produced by the Strategy Alignment Team of Search for Common Ground. Lead authors include Livia Rohrbach, Adrienne Lemon and Shiva Dhungana, with contributions from Alia Botoeva, Niankoye Bolamou, Anaïs Caput, Sèdera Rajoelison, Omar Salem, and Rachel Walsh Taza. The research team would like to thank Jack Farrell, Alex Poppe, Michael Robinson, Kara Schectman for their insights and support throughout the process.

How to cite this report

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Acronyms

ACLED  Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
CAR  Central African Republic
CSO  Civil Society Organization
GAM  Grounded Accountability Model
DRC  Democratic Republic of Congo
EU  European Union
GBV  Gender-Based Violence
GOHS  Gendered Online Hate Speech
IDPs  Internally Displaced People
PIF  Peace Impact Framework
SDGs  Sustainable Development Goal
SROI  Social Return on Investments
Search  Search for Common Ground
UN  United Nations
UNSCR  U.N. Security Council Resolution
US  United States
USAID  United States Agency for International Development
YPs  Youth, Peace, and Security
To address the multifaceted challenges that societies where we work experience and strengthen pathways for peace, Search for Common Ground (Search) aligned the focus of its programs with some of the key forces shaping its strategy. This global impact assessment, the first annual assessment produced by Search, tracks the results of programs in 2023 against strategies designed to transform conflicts and then measures the impact of these results on peace in 2023, a year marked by a concerning surge in global conflicts, especially internationalized intrastate conflicts.1

To meet these dynamics, Search teams and partners have focused on key areas with particular attention to marginalized and deeply divided communities: rapid response and economic empowerment, addressing long-standing discrimination through media, and political processes that too often exclude those most important to ensuring lasting change. There was a specific commitment across the organization to explore digital forms of peacebuilding and to directly engage with how technology is shaping conflict dynamics. The merger of Search with Preemptive Love Coalition in 2023 created a powerful partnership for peace, enabling us to achieve a stronger impact. This includes strengthening the rapid and ongoing response to crises and enhancing economic empowerment capabilities, as well as expanding the organization’s footprint in Latin America through the establishment of programs in Mexico and Venezuela.
The vital signs of a healthy society: our approach to measuring peace

In 2023, Search and its partners measured their impact by aligning results to the Peace Impact Framework (PIF), which was developed with input from people in more than 180 organizations in 45 countries worldwide - from local community organizers to government representatives to academics. From their insights, five elements emerged that were vital for peace, with three ways to measure them consistently and aggregate lessons globally. The five vital signs of peace used as a frame of analysis for impact include:

▶ People's personal and direct experience with violence (or safety) - whether they are dying or attacked, whether they feel safe as they walk home, etc.
▶ People's agency (or powerlessness) in connection to their societies and whether they believe they can positively change them.
▶ A society’s polarization (or solidarity) – the level of trust people have in each other that they share a social contract with the same rules, the same opportunities, and interdependence.
▶ The legitimacy (or corruption) of institutions maintaining the trust of the people they are meant to serve – these can be government institutions like security and justice, but they might also be institutions in media, religious, or cultural structures.
▶ Resources that show investments supporting peace or conflict long-term – like the import and export of weapons, the market demand for a free and open media, or the value of time and resources that young people are investing in their communities.

These elements are interlinked. Violence erodes trust in institutions, reducing personal agency and belief in the ability to create positive change. Institutions can heighten polarization in populations that cannot access necessary services. Societies without trust in a broader social contract and the institutions to support them see investments made in increasingly competitive, conflict-fueling approaches, further undermining efforts to reduce violence. They can also reverse. A strong institutional response that represents the needs of all can reduce the need for violence, and a society making the right investments can find new opportunities to repair divides for long-term societal health. These vital signs connect to create an image of peace, and understanding them together shows us where to begin.

Search’s people, and how they are represented

In 2023, we partnered with 671 local organizations, engaging millions through activities and programming. Overall, 278,457 people were engaged directly through Search activities, with an additional 130,862 through local partners. Search’s combined media efforts touched over 38.4 million lives. Moreover, 7,991 individuals benefited from economic empowerment initiatives, while 15,287 people were supported by humanitarian and relief efforts.

This community of people investing in peace was supported and nurtured in 2023, but this evaluation asks an underlying question: What does it mean? How did the work of Search and partnering local organizations impact those living in conflict, and where can we improve? The data collected represents perspectives and experiences of a large cross-section of the populations in these countries, including hard-to-reach groups such as young men and women in rural areas, marginalized women and sexual minorities, and various religious and ethnic groups. This report looks specifically at the data available for 2023 and draws patterns across programs to make conclusions about the results of peacebuilding strategies in 2023.
In 2023, conflict continued to be widespread and pervasive: 12% more violent conflict occurred in 2023 compared to 2022, and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) records an increase of over 30% compared to 2019. One in six people live in an active conflict area, though conflicts differ in their intensity, frequency, and form. Fifty countries are classified as extreme, high, or turbulent levels of conflict by ACLED, demonstrating how widespread violence is across the globe. In addition to these acute conflict situations, conflict is growing fastest in middle-income, democratizing countries, demonstrating the importance of peacebuilding across diverse conflict settings.

Search operates across 35 countries worldwide, representing about 70% of the fatalities due to violent conflict last year in major conflicts around the world. For this evaluation, countries were divided into three categories based on data on the number of refugees, displaced, or conflict-related deaths in each population and a review of critical events and triggers in 2023.

This report emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing conflicts as interconnected systems. In 2023, the countries where Search worked often had wide-reaching effects beyond their borders, and there was an interplay between them. The evaluation highlights results across the acute, protracted, and latent stages which are each taking place across the conflict geographies of Search programs. For example, Sudan’s conflict strained resources in Chad and South Sudan and contributed to regional instability. Therefore, strategies for building peace must focus on a range of stages across these geographies to be effective long-term.

These data also showed the challenges of looking at conflict dynamics solely from the lens of violence. We hope to provide a fuller picture as better data becomes available across all countries. Out of the ten countries where Search operates that were in the ‘acute’ stage in 2023, Sudan, Syria, Palestine, and Israel were not predicted to be in this stage based on their violence and displacement rates. Chad is also an outlier, currently handling an influx of over 500,000 refugees from Sudan with incredible strain on its systems and resources, their violence and displacement rates.

Data shared in this report include mixed methods from evaluations and research in 196 projects in 2023. The vital signs and patterns across results came from data collected in three ways. In addition to collecting data on lived experiences mentioned above, teams began to track ten aligned measures, using global standard survey questions for long-term tracking that aligns with field-wide standards such as the Sustainable Development Goal indicators (particularly in SDG 16). Quantitative data that includes these and other indicators across all evaluations and monitoring reports were assembled to analyze the impact of programs. The team also used documented, verified, and coded practitioner observations to capture expected and unexpected outcomes from programming. These came from practitioner reflections that included Search teams and partners and were verified either through independent evaluators or by the research team. Outcomes are not always predictable based on a set of assumptions. Given the multiple variables at play, documentation of outcomes, or “side-effects,” is necessary to analyze what programs result in the long term.

The examples provided in each section are meant to illustrate emerging patterns but are not exhaustive lists of all impact achieved across programs and advocacy efforts that took place. By analyzing the patterns of outcomes across various programs and contexts, the report demonstrates consistent results and types of impact achieved thus far. Results in this report are organized across acute, protracted and latent stages. To see all results organized across conflict geographies, please see the online interactive map.

### How to read this report

This report reviews the global context for 2023, analyzes the impact of Search and its partners across three distinct stages of conflict (acute, protracted, and latent), and provides recommendations for forward action. Each section first presents insights on what peace means and what matters most for people in each context. Teams consulted the lived experiences of people living in conflict by applying the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM) to capture locally developed indicators for accountability, and some examples of these insights are shared. Sections also include an overview of patterns found in the response and overall impact of Search and its partners. In the following pages, each section provides examples for deeper insight into the findings of impact, with data across Search programs from that context.

Data shared in this report include mixed methods from evaluations and research in 196 projects in 2023. The vital signs and patterns across results came from data collected in three ways. In addition to collecting data on lived experiences mentioned above, teams began to track ten aligned measures, using global standard survey questions for long-term tracking that aligns with field-wide standards such as the Sustainable Development Goal indicators (particularly in SDG 16). Quantitative data that includes these and other indicators across all evaluations and monitoring reports were assembled to analyze the impact of programs. The team also used documented, verified, and coded practitioner observations to capture expected and unexpected outcomes from programming. These came from practitioner reflections that included Search teams and partners and were verified either through independent evaluators or by the research team. Outcomes are not always predictable based on a set of assumptions. Given the multiple variables at play, documentation of outcomes, or “side-effects,” is necessary to analyze what programs result in the long term.

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3. Defining criteria included data related to conflict casualties, displacement, natural disasters, and unforeseen political shocks. The data used included Armed-Conflict-Related Deaths (ACLED), displaced people and refugees data from UNHCR, and Disasters EM-DAT Statistics (Deaths, Affected, Injured) on Natural and Technical Disasters from 2023.

4. For more information on the Grounded Accountability Model and the community of practice that continues to develop standards on this approach, please visit: https://cnxus.org/gam/.


6. Interactive map available at https://arcg.is/8S5l.
Diving into Search’s impact

Each geography of conflict where Search works has set ten-year strategies to support safe, healthy, and just societies. This section first outlines the results of Search’s programs against those strategies to identify where we have the most success and face global challenges. Trends and learning are then split across acute, protracted, and latent stages that cross these geographies to highlight each trend.

Global trends

Search teams set strategies aligned to the organization’s global strategy between 2019-2021, with a few geographies developing strategies only in more recent years. Strategies outline between three and six objectives for enduring change for peace. Under these objectives, two, five and ten-year milestones were set to identify what progress would look like against each objective. Most teams are in their third or fourth year since these strategies were written, with the exception of the United States and Latin America, where the merger between Preemptive Love Coalition and Search significantly changed planning and strategies in 2023. Across these conflict geographies, there is evidence of progress on several two-year milestones (but no geography has completed all of their two-year milestones), and progress toward five-year milestones is just beginning or is not yet underway.

The graphic shows progress towards two-year and five-year milestones across the objectives for each strategy as a percentage of objectives that currently have evidence of progress. Any objectives where evidence shows teams are beginning to meet two-year milestones (on the left) and the same for five-year milestones (on the right) are part of the graph, and those that have no evidence of progress yet are not shown. A score of 20%, for example, would indicate that there is evidence of significant progress toward milestones under 20% of the objectives in that strategy. A score of 100% indicates that all objectives have evidence of significant progress against the planned milestones - it does not mean all two-year milestones are completely finished.

For example, in Lake Chad, one of the two-year milestones under the strategy’s objective to support citizen-led security and justice reform was, “Citizens, including women and youth, have improved relationships, trust, and collaboration with security providers.” There is evidence of progress on this milestone, so the objective was considered as one where two-year milestones are seeing progress. However, this does not indicate that the team has finished work on this milestone.

The team has just opened programming in Chad this year, meaning that even as we see evidence of progress against this milestone, there will still be work to do on it.

Some teams progressed further than expected on one to two objectives (hitting both year two and five milestones), even if they had not achieved results in other parts of their strategies. For example, in the Great Lakes, one of the five-year milestones under an objective to cultivate a new generation of leaders modeling collaboration is, “Existing obstacles to youth’s socio-economic empowerment are gradually reduced, including the specific barriers faced by young women.” Even though not all two-year milestones were met in other areas, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi have both made significant progress on this five-year milestone.

In two cases (that of the US and of Northern Triangle, Mexico, and Venezuela), strategies developed are too new to evaluate against them accurately this year.
Despite challenges, teams continue to lay the foundations of their strategies.

All strategies were affected by the pandemic between 2020-2021, which brought pauses in programming, barriers to in-person events, and even changes in the conflict dynamics themselves. Most strategies were not originally written to account for such a significant wave affecting all programming.

While conflicts are expected to evolve and be dynamic, several strategies were further affected by other unexpected circumstances. The most common issue that affected strategies were failed or stalled peace processes. Strategies in the Bay of Bengal, Afghanistan, the Sudans, the Sahel, and the Levant all depended on the continuation of peace processes that were upended so dramatically, teams had to either halt or change significant parts of their strategies.

Still, considerable progress has been made across these conflicts, and the groundwork has been laid for Search, partnering organizations, and a vast network of people working for peace to transform some of the most substantial conflicts around the world. The table below shows where Search made the most progress up to 2023 and where work remains.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Remaining challenges</th>
<th>Why</th>
<th>What should happen to meet two and five year goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addressing root causes through conflict prevention mechanisms</td>
<td>Conflict transformation &amp; reconciliation</td>
<td>Most teams focused their programming on specific locations or mechanisms like early-warning systems for preventing violence and protecting people. Deep work with community members has endured even through acute stages of crisis.</td>
<td>Shift the scope: engage deeply with cultural institutions that have the power to influence violent conflict and build on prevention successes to popularize support for reconciliation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-led empowerment; long-term engagement</td>
<td>Media &amp; communication; interfaith collaboration; cultural change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth &amp; gender inclusion, participation and protection</td>
<td>Empowerment and inclusion in political and social institutions</td>
<td>Most teams broke barriers for marginalized groups beyond 'easy to access' communities. There is a strong base for diverse buy-in to systemic change. The focus was on their access and protection. High-level institutional change requires time and investment. Teams that achieved institutional change shifted attention from other parts of their strategy.</td>
<td>Revisit the timing of objectives, reevaluate how long they take, and determine which ones should come first as a building block to other objectives. Build on UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 2250 to support youth and women in mobilizing for institutional reforms that impact peace. It may require advocacy strategies and global institutional support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional justice mechanisms</td>
<td>Security sector reform; Regional collaboration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable livelihoods; environmental peacebuilding</td>
<td>Economic development or cross-sector collaboration</td>
<td>Teams are working actively with the private sector as a core community stakeholder. Many teams still need to name the top sectors influencing violent conflict and organize programming to influence how the sector can change in the long-term.</td>
<td>Define the top markets or sectors with the greatest impact on conflict in the future. The tech and climate sectors have a growing influence on conflict. Mitigating violence should be a strategy for building credibility with the long-term aim of influencing business models.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth; Women</td>
<td>Broader marginalized groups among youth, women, and ethnic minorities.</td>
<td>Search has focused on engaging youth and women and building diversity and representation in those groups.</td>
<td>Continue the strategy, which has proven to work, with a specific aim of engaging deeply around dividing issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local communities</td>
<td>Engaging broader religious communities; Governance</td>
<td>Search has excelled, focusing on a wide range of actors (including governmental and religious) within the scope of a physical community.</td>
<td>Identify how to engage religious and government actors for national or regional institutional reform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries where teams were in place and building strategies prior to 2019</td>
<td>New teams or teams heavily impacted by the merger with Preemptive Love Coalition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places with acute and protracted stages of violence, coup d’etats, natural disasters</td>
<td>Failed peace processes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Identify the dynamics that shape buy-in for peace processes, not only the specific process itself, to develop agendas that endure in the face of failed peace processes. These should center on diverse participation and buy-in for peace.
Acute crisis does not wash away all progress.

While almost all of the geographies where Search and its partners work have experienced some acute crises since 2019, data in 2023 has shown that crises do not require teams to restart from scratch. The groundwork laid out in previous years can be crucial to a team’s ability to adapt and continue its work. Teams in Afghanistan and Sudan are proof of this; they both experienced incredible setbacks in their strategies. However, even in the most difficult moments, there are clear signs that Search’s work will continue to have a lasting impact. The ability of teams to prevent violence and continue to build constituencies of leaders is outlined in later sections of the report.

It is time for strategy updates.

Most teams are nearing the time for another update to check the assumptions they hold and the opportunities they have found and decide their next phase. Some 2-year and 5-year milestones were overly ambitious in either scope or scale. For example, multiple strategies have blockages due to Search’s presence and ability to engage across countries connected to these conflicts. For example, Search maintained a strong presence in Kenya and Tanzania and has been able to expand work into Mozambique and Ethiopia. However, a large portion of the strategy is related to Somalia. Search has had a small presence in Somalia but has yet to expand into that part of the geography fully. Another milestone in the Lake Chad Basin was for the justice sector to have “identified pathways to integrate security and justice reform efforts.” However, in this geography, Search took time to solidify a presence in Cameroon and Chad, and institutional change took a significant amount of time. These are not failures of the strategies but adjustments to the plans required for accurate expectations moving forward.

Programs are consistently achieving progress across the five vital signs, just not all at once.

A major question for Search staff and partners when they committed to using the Peace Impact Framework was, “Will we be able to see impact across all of these aspects of peace?” When we examine the data on populations directly impacted by Search’s work across programs and geographies from a wide variety of evaluators and methodologies, the answer is “yes.” These results are consistent and meaningful, and the effects of the work in 2023 have rippled beyond direct participants in programs to their broader communities and societies. The data supported this from internal studies and external evaluations across all stages of conflict. However, there are currently limitations to evidence and programming on impact. Few programming examples target wide-scale national, regional, or sector-wide change for peace. This evaluation, therefore, does not speak to the efficacy of that type of programming. The evidence only allows for conclusions about peacebuilding at the scale and scope of its application.

In 2023, some standard indicators were consistently used across projects, enough to begin to examine patterns. They span four of the five vital signs: violence, agency, polarization, and legitimacy. We hope that as teams collect this data more consistently in the future, we will be able to find even more meaningful patterns to help us understand what enables this, what endures, and where the biggest challenges lie.

Surveys of populations targeted by peacebuilding programs showed that on average programs yielded:

**Results by Theme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Endline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence (Safety)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency (Hopelessness)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization (Solidarity)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimacy (Corruption)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

86% increase in people feeling safe walking in areas they live by through violence mitigation, empowering local champions for peace, and addressing long-term divisions.

100% increase in agency rates among marginalized groups to positively change their societies via economic empowerment, addressing discrimination, and leveraging media for peace.

130% increase in populations’ belief in intergroup collaboration by bridging divisions, promoting social inclusion, and fostering positive relationships.

95% increase in the perception that institutions are inclusive and responsive by enhancing their accountability.
Meeting needs and reducing loss of life in acute stages of conflict

The dynamics of acute conflicts

Search operates in some of the most acute violent conflicts, including in ten countries with 117,226 conflict-related deaths in 2023. Approximately every 5 minutes, a person dies in one of these countries due to armed conflict. In acute stages of conflict, the data show that safety and security are of paramount concern but that, in practice, the needs span all of the vital signs of peace. Acute contexts often reveal the underlying “cracks in the system” and failures to serve peoples’ diverse and urgent needs.7 People described safety and violence in other terms: hunger, heightened rates of sexual violence and trafficking, and more. Agency and polarization were high priorities for the population, affecting how people can ensure security. Programs, therefore, often protect a sense of agency to support people in acting quickly and responding to the most pressing needs in their communities. Search programs in Myanmar, for example, protected a sense of agency: over 90% of participants felt empowered to influence their surroundings and contribute positively to their communities despite the continued challenging context.

What is peace, and what matters most for people in acute stages of conflict?

VIOLENCE

“It is the reduction of food insecurity” (Chad)

“When I don’t see random checkpoints, that’s when I know there is peace in my community.” (Myanmar)

AGENCY

“If women had access to identity cards where we live” (Afghanistan)

POLARIZATION

“Religious leaders can support people in resolving local conflicts.” (Afghanistan)

LEGITIMACY

“When people can actually report a crime to the local authority and expect a positive outcome.” (Myanmar)

How did Search respond?

Search focused on targeted interventions that prevent further escalation through rapid response initiatives that promoted dialogue—particularly among host and displaced communities, and offered reliable mechanisms for justice and conflict mediation.

What was Search’s impact?

Supporting the agency of peacebuilders and partners directly prevented and reduced violence in targeted areas.

Reduced polarization and improved positive relationships have allowed people to better meet the needs of those displaced by violence.

Supporting the agency of local service providers, governments and civil society had a ripple effect for effective relief from violence and fostering legitimacy of core institutions.

In at least one case in 2023, there was success engaging with market forces to transform investments that directly contribute to violence and human rights violations.

7. The World Justice Program ranks countries on various governance factors using a 0 to 1 scale, indicating the perceived legitimacy of their governments, and of the ten countries in acute violent conflict, six were ranked by WJP with an average score of 4.3. World Justice Project. The Global Rule of Law Recession Continues. WJP Rule of Law Index, January 6, 2024. https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/.
Supporting the agency of peacebuilders and partners directly prevented and reduced violence in targeted areas.

- In the **DRC**, Search’s program provided health and protection services to some of the most vulnerable communities at the border with the Central African Republic (CAR), and the sense of security of community members across communities increased by 30% (from 40% to 52%). This increase was even higher among women despite high rates of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) as a key part of the conflict in this area. Local protection platforms in Wenze, South Ubangi Province, supported by **Search-DRC**, successfully advocated for community needs and influenced the UN Refugee Agency, the National Refugee Commission, and the World Food Program to extend cash distribution to the Wenze site.

- Among **Israelis and Palestinians**, a Search-facilitated emergency forum defused two potentially violent crises in the wake of October 7th in the mixed city of Lod, with official support from the local municipality and the police to address pressing issues such as shelter, food supply, and medical aid, while also working diligently to maintain peace and prevent violence.

- In **Sudan**, in South Kordofan, local peacebuilders partnering with Search played a crucial role in averting a major crisis in Dilling by mediating between the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces, preventing the invasion of Dilling. This achievement underscores the effectiveness of empowering local actors through the Common Ground Approach, as their increased agency and adept mediation directly deescalated tensions, preventing what could have escalated into active conflict in Dilling.

Reduced polarization and improved positive relationships have allowed people to better meet the needs of those displaced by violence.

- In **DRC**, where displacement had increased tensions among groups, often around strained resources, the program focused on health and protection support services has increased positive relationships between displaced and host communities by 37% (from 62% to 85%).

- In **Burkina Faso**, the engagement of women leaders increased solidarity in a time of crisis, with women leaders from host communities applying conflict resolution skills to facilitate the peaceful arrival of neighboring communities displaced by a violent extremist attack.

- In **Israel and Palestine**, the team and partners have engaged with influential leaders across dividing lines to foster collaboration, even when crises spike. In the face of adversity following October 7th, Israeli and Palestinian women who partnered with Search continued to meet in working groups for policy, outreach, and advocacy. The groups prepare women for pivotal roles in future peace processes and governance, showcasing the power of unity and shared determination to shape a peaceful future. Partnering Jewish religious leaders also sent a public letter of gratitude to the Bedouin communities in the south of Israel who courageously saved lives during the Hamas attack to model new ways of building relationships.

- In **Sudan**, Search’s interventions not only increased women’s sense of agency (the percentage of women who believe that they can make a positive difference on peace and security issues in their communities increased by 42% (from 67% to 95%), they also increased the percentage of community members who believe that women can contribute positively to peace and security by 92% (from 50% to 96%). This improvement marks a profound change in social attitudes towards women’s roles in a context where traditional barriers have long hindered their participation in public and political life. Through local partners, Search-Sudan has also significantly impacted the lives of displaced and host communities by providing livelihood support, particularly to women. This initiative empowered 30 women with the tea-making and dry crops trade and 80 women farmers with seeds and agricultural tools. It enhanced their economic independence and participation in community decision-making through targeted support and educational workshops on good agricultural practices.

- Amid **Syria**’s environment, qualitative data documented crucial dialogues between Syrian women and political leaders. Search’s work with partners in Deir Ezzor created a unique platform for women to expose concerns and violations of rights directly to those in power for the first time.

- In **Niger**, the team’s intervention led to significant improvements in levels of satisfaction with the way their legal problems were solved (37 percentage points). Search and partners worked to improve people’s knowledge of their rights and how to obtain redress (which saw a similar increase of 33 percentage points) and provide legal assistance. Moreover, the proportion of community members who feel empowered to defend their rights and access justice has almost doubled throughout the program’s life. This shift is particularly significant because the population identified access to justice for all as a priority need and a key indicator to bring peace.

- **Search-Afghanistan** supported journalists to produce credible and accessible media content as the Taliban came to power, and continued to do so in the midst of multiple earthquakes causing crises in 2023. So far, Search and journalists have reached 4.7 million people, covering important social issues like access to justice for women and children. Broader impact will be determined in 2024.

- In **Myanmar**, Search solidified legitimacy and support for members of civil society, community information management committees, and citizen journalists in a rapidly shrinking space. Nearly 74% of them reported being able to mobilize resources and funds for initiatives, and together they produced credible content to challenge misinformation and hate speech and advocate for minority rights and participation on security issues.

In at least one case in 2023, there was success engaging with market forces to transform investments that directly contribute to violence and human rights violations.

- In the **DRC**, civil society partners were supported to constructively engage and effectively enforce the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, significantly impacting the private and mining sectors. Through targeted advocacy, including lobbying in Geneva and conducting detailed surveys, civil society organizations are now attempting to shift their role from being watchdogs to trusted partners for private companies, but this is proving to be a new challenge. Companies’ active participation in the voluntary principles remains uneven and, in some cases, is hindered by limitations companies set on collaboration.
Transforming protracted stages of conflict for lasting peace

The dynamics of protracted conflicts

Protracted stages of conflict are marked by unstable governance structures, widespread availability of weapons and arms trafficking, and long-term effects of displacement (such as family separation, loss of livelihoods, interrupted education, and resource demands). Unlike the acute stage, these countries have no specific defining event or shock in 2023. Across Venezuela and Mexico, for example, one out of every two households has a firearm on average, and conflict-related death rates remain significant. However, no one shock defined these dynamics in 2023. Like acute stages, people share a multifaceted vision of peace across protracted stages encompassing all vital signs. However, polarization and disenfranchisement of certain groups like youth stand out more clearly. People see their security as dependent on inclusivity, broader accountability of institutions, and economic revitalization. To meet protracted stages, Search and partners supported the agency of marginalized people who have felt disempowered by long cycles of violence and of influencers who can leverage their platforms to tackle polarization. They also made substantial gains in the legitimacy institutions have held for those historically marginalized.

Data comes from the latest available statistics from the Small Arms Survey and represents the average, not necessarily the most common amount of guns per household. Notably, the same dataset showed that the United States, while violence and displacement levels put it in a different stage of conflict, actually has approximately 3 civilian firearms per household, a higher rate than any other country in the world.

What is peace, and what matters most for people in protracted stages of conflict?

**VIOLENCE**
- “When we see less land grabbing.” (South Sudan)
- “When inter-communal conflicts are resolved without violence.” (Nigeria)
- “Community members share security information with security authorities when they identify potential threats.” (Tanzania)

**Polarization**
- “Communities from across dividing lines engage in social activities together.” (Nigeria, but also other countries)
- “Refugees and IDPs talk to each other and share resources in communities.” (South Sudan)

**Agency**
- “We need more youths possessing voter’s cards.” (Cameroon)
- “Communities initiate their own development projects.” (Mozambique)

**Legitimacy**
- “Public services are accessible to all, without bias or corruption or language barriers.” (Cameroon)
- “Legal systems are trusted and seen as impartial.” (Nigeria)
- “Young people receive moral and financial support from the government.” (Cameroon)
- “There is more peace now because there’s road development.” (South Sudan)
- “Armed groups can disarm and reintegrate.” (South Sudan)

How did Search respond?

Search focused on addressing drivers of violence and supporting access to services for better legitimacy of core institutions. Broader polarization was impacted in some cases, but not all, with agency as an intermediate focus.

What was Search’s impact?

Supporting agency of marginalized and vulnerable groups helped them proactively address violence, particularly on land access and environmental conflicts.

Addressing the direct needs of critically marginalized and polarized groups encouraged breakthroughs and a restored sense of agency.

Increasing influencers’ agency from marginalized communities reshaped the perceptions of their groups’ contributions to society.
Supporting the agency of marginalized and vulnerable groups helped them proactively address violence, particularly on land and environmental conflicts.

In South Sudan, participants’ agency increased by 30 percentage points, where there was a 23 percentage point increase in both host and displaced community members reporting positive interactions with each other, and perceptions of safety improved by 48 percentage points. Atrocities in areas affected by population displacements have been a longstanding issue due to resource scarcity and a lack of formal avenues for the population to engage in solutions. Search and partnering leaders strengthened multiple avenues for engagement like reporting mechanisms for early signs of atrocities, supporting interaction in shared spaces like markets and public events, and live talk shows with community leaders to raise awareness on atrocities and human rights violations in and around camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Regular engagement with local government authorities, particularly through Peace Committees and the Community Watch Group, culminated in a significant milestone for the legitimacy of local institutions managing atrocities when IDP camp members were allocated designated land, promoting resettlement and preempting displacement and conflicts due to seasonal flooding.

In Mali, women from the commune of Sadiola were not allowed to participate in resolving local conflicts and were excluded from peacebuilding efforts. Their participation in leadership development and training led to a change in the perception and attitude of local male leaders about women’s contribution to media platforms and conflict resolution processes. By the end of the program, local women peacebuilders led conflict resolution initiatives, including for conflict related to the management of mining sites. Religious leaders who worked with Search and partners showed similar potential last year and continue to resolve conflicts in their communities without the support of Search.

In the case of CAR, there has been a significant shift in community attitudes, with a 73 percentage point increase in members committing to collaborative approaches to solve issues, showing increased confidence in mechanisms other than violence to resolve conflict. The team supported young people to act on conflicts related to land and environmental issues. The program worked, with a 41 percentage point increase in young people taking action related to conflict issues on land and environmental issues. Still, they also saw a decrease of 10 percentage points in the number of young people in that same group who were taking action to deal with conflicts more broadly. These numbers do not cancel each other out, but the data do suggest that as young people became more active on land and environmental issues, at least some reduced time and efforts to address other needs - an important consideration for future programming.

To address violent conflicts related to water and sanitation in Sera District in Yemen, Search supported a dialogue process that has so far resulted in community representatives proposing and developing plans for new vaults providing access to the water network for the population, along with Citizen Charters for greater accountability and understanding between the local authorities, the water foundation and community representatives. Dialogues are still underway, and there are plans for co-developed solutions to conflict to continue across Sera and other districts, and support to platforms for youth and women to continue to expand their participation and roles in serving and representing their people.

Programs supporting women as mediators in Burundi and Niger have enabled them to now engage independently in conflict mediation, leading to the successful resolution of 20 conflict cases, involving the dedication of 63 mediators and 414 community members who contributed over 3,000 hours of their own time. The team is continuing to track the time invested and conflicts resolved to understand better the long-term impact of supporting mediators in this way.

Increasing influencers’ agency from marginalized communities reshaped the perceptions of their groups’ contributions to society.

In Mali, the team leveraged shared economic interests across dividing lines to reduce polarization. Local peace clubs and authorities played a crucial role in reopening a vital livestock market closed for years due to conflict. They organized dialogues where both sides could discuss their issues, leading to a mutual understanding and resolution. Quantitative data showed that local actors’ efforts allowed families to buy and sell livestock again, a crucial result for livelihoods, though the long-term value remains undetermined. Search also raised awareness of the importance of enabling groups to pursue education through peace clubs and local authorities, which increased young girls’ attendance and retention rates in local schools.

The Iraq team supported young and vulnerable Iraqis through a comprehensive tech training program. By collaborating with industry partners, they taught high-demand digital skills and promoted suitable job opportunities for trainees. They also supported over 400 diverse business owners, emphasizing those in more remote or hard-to-reach areas, including women (particularly women and female heads of households), religious and ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and IDPs. In several instances, business owners began to invest in peace in their communities after receiving support. Long-term outcomes are still being studied to see how this further impacts communities.

The Venezuela team bridged social and political divides, offering food aid, educational support, and small business assistance to address shared community needs and foster collaboration. With a human-centered approach, they leveraged the buy-in of people aligned with Chavistas and opposition, their programs included mobile canteens and community gatherings to meet immediate needs. They also aim to reduce polarization by supporting those experiencing marginalization. This strategy has led to the distribution of over 15,000 hot meals across Zulia and Caracas, the launch of 11 women-owned businesses with comprehensive training, and the rehabilitation of 39 roofs, benefitting over 130 people and embedding principles of social inclusion, trust-building, and economic advancement.

In Mexico, the team served critically underserved migrant populations, reaching 3,845 people with food assistance and supporting over 2,000 people to invest in their communities with gardening or agricultural projects alongside the “Classroom on Wheels” tech bus initiative that offered 121 participants valuable and practical digital skills. A majority of the participants were female, promoting gender inclusion and transformation.

Addressing the direct needs of critically disadvantaged and polarized groups encouraged key breakthroughs and a restored sense of agency for many.

In South Sudan, efforts to address other needs - an important consideration for future programming. By the end of the program, local women peacebuilders led conflict resolution initiatives, including for conflict related to the management of mining sites. Religious leaders who worked with Search and partners showed similar potential last year and continue to resolve conflicts in their communities without the support of Search.

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Addressing root causes of latent stages of conflict to solidify enduring change

The dynamics of latent conflicts

While overt outbreaks of violence are more sporadic in latent conflicts, this trend can obscure hidden tensions still healing from a history of conflict, or growing challenges in managing spillover effects of violence in other countries. There often remain challenges like deeply ingrained socio-cultural disparities (across ethnic, religious, generational, gender and political affiliation lines) that have persisted over extended periods of time. With increasing poverty, poor governance, and growing corruption, lack of resources and unequal distribution of resources favoring certain groups, decreasing trust in the government, especially among minority groups, provides avenues for the emergence of conflict and violence in society.

What is peace, and what matters most for people in latent stages of conflict?

POLARIZATION

“On the same street, neighbors of diverse ethnicities such as Russians, Dungans, Kyrgyz, and Uighurs, come together to participate in religious customs and practices, such as painting eggs and sharing iftar.” (Kyrgyzstan)

“When all can speak their own native languages and not face any prejudice.” (Sri Lanka)

“Community members share security information with security authorities when they identify potential threats.” (Tanzania)

AGENCY

 “[People of color] can see and tell the experiences of “our people” in historical narratives.” (USA)

“What women get elected based on people’s votes instead of bribes.” (Sri Lanka)

LEGITIMACY

“The state ministry of religion serves in favor of the people of Indonesia regardless of their religious affiliation without favoritism.” (Indonesia)

“The executive and judicial branches take actions guided exclusively by the existing law.” (Kyrgyzstan)

“Laws and policies being reviewed on safeguarding matters.” (Kenya)

INVESTMENTS

“When social media and mainstream media are powerful in raising awareness about religious issues such as coverage of Maria’s statue.” (Indonesia)

“The state promotes harmonious religious coexistence through cultural policies that include creating films, paintings, and media materials on this subject.” (Kyrgyzstan)

How did Search respond?

Search’s addressed root causes like socio-cultural disparities and governance issues to prevent violence. It is well-matched to the patterns seen across the indicators developed from people’s lived experiences. Programs focus on enhancing individual freedoms and economic agency, empowering marginalized groups, and dealing with discrimination, and building institutional trust.

What was Search’s impact?

People rejected physical and digital violence in targeted populations, reflecting a shift towards peaceful approaches in communities historically marred by violence.

The Common Ground Approach served as a catalyst for people to overcome divides inside institutions and foster relationships across representatives of polarized groups.

Improved agency of people to prevent discrimination and reduce polarization showed societal ripple effects, especially when media actors popularized and increased demand for these efforts.

Economic empowerment programs contributed to the increased economic agency of community members, especially marginalized groups such as women.

Programs have significantly enhanced public trust and institutional legitimacy in targeted communities, empowering them to actively engage and resolve grievances peacefully.

Media and Digital Peacebuilding programs have also improved the legitimacy of media institutions as constructive and credible actors in challenging settings.
People rejected physical and digital violence in targeted populations, reflecting a shift towards peaceful approaches in communities historically marred by violence.

- After the 2022 general elections and in the months following, the team in Kenya significantly shifted public perceptions against using violence to achieve political ends, with a 40% decrease in community members who believe violence is sometimes necessary for electoral success (from 15% to 9%). A majority (66%) of respondents also reported experiencing peaceful resolutions to election-related issues, significant in a context where electoral violence has been common. The uniform change in perception across gender and age groups indicated a broader shift across the population, including vulnerable groups like women and youth.

- In Sri Lanka, Media and Digital Peacebuilding programs tackling technology-facilitated gender-based violence increased young men’s understanding of the harmful impacts of hate speech by 50%, and there was a 30% decrease in hate speech posts between June and November 2023, which will be continuously monitored for progress.10 The response also results from advocacy work with big tech companies. Search also worked with CSO partners to develop a collective CSO strategy on big tech engagement through a broad consultative process that included district-level women’s and GBV organizations. It sets the basis for future advocacy with big tech, going beyond the limits of content moderation and integrating design governance.

Improved agency of people to prevent discrimination and reduce polarization showed societal ripple effects, especially when media actors popularized and increased demand for these efforts.

- In Kenya, listeners of Search’s media program reported a 75% increase in their ability to identify misinformation and hate speech that could incite electoral violence, from 48% to 84%. At the same time, 89% of community members in areas targeted by the program said that an ordinary person in their community can make a positive difference.

- In Pakistan, 69% of journalists who participated in initiatives led by Search felt they could influence their community, compared to 25% of those who had not participated. This finding underscores the significant impact of the project on boosting participating journalists’ agency and their perceived ability to cause change in their communities. By adopting the Common Ground Approach, journalists participating in the fellowship program also reported significant increases in Facebook page followers and engagement, with posts now receiving 15,000 to 20,000 views, up from 500 to 1,000. There were also several documented cases where female journalists also secured jobs through peer recommendations after Search advocated for changes in access to press clubs and raised awareness in media houses.

- In Indonesia, Search collaborated with partners and media to publish a guidance manual on creating media products that respect minorities’ dignity and rights. Journalists and content creators used this manual to foster religious tolerance and respect for human rights with news, documentaries, social media infographics, short and long videos, blog articles, podcasts, and a short film reaching 4.8 million people. A majority (61%) of survey respondents said there has been an improvement in tolerance and freedom of religion or belief compared to two years ago. The broader impact of this work across the public will be tracked in the coming years.
Economic empowerment programs contributed to the increased agency of community members, especially of marginalized groups such as women.

- In Sri Lanka, programming promoting economic entrepreneurship among women led to significant outcomes: a 50 percentage point increase in women leaders with enhanced business literacy/knowledge (from 30% to 80%). There was also a similar increase in the confidence of participating entrepreneurs in making informed household financial decisions (from 30% to 77%). 87% of participating women economic leaders can now identify financial resources, marking a substantial boost in their capacity for improving livelihoods.

Programs have significantly enhanced public trust and institutional legitimacy in targeted communities, empowering them to actively engage and resolve grievances peacefully.

- In Jordan, survey data showed that the number of young people who felt they had the agency to influence local governance issues that affected them more than tripled (from 26% to 96%). Inclusive government programming led to 76% of engaged youth expressing satisfaction with the services they receive from authorities, and 55% now believe that decision-making processes are inclusive and responsive.

- In Kenya, surveys showed that the number of people able to access avenues or opportunities for addressing grievances during the electoral process increased more than 5 times (from 13% to 70%). In Garissa specifically, convening programs, with the support of authorities, facilitated the resolution of conflicts. For example, institutionalizing services like movement and cargo tracking directly mitigated violence and tensions developing between groups that often create triggers for heightened divisions that surface during the electoral period.

- In Tanzania, surveys indicated a 53% increase in community member’s access to a safe platform for discussing sensitive issues related to violent extremism, improving from 45% to 69%. Programs bringing together police and community members through dialogue and town hall meetings contributed to increasing the legitimacy of the police in Mtwara, now perceived as a credible partner in safeguarding community security, including by marginalized groups such as women. Observations documented that the program established spaces for empathy and mutual understanding, strengthening relationships and tangible collaboration between community members and police officers.

Media and digital peacebuilding programs have also improved the legitimacy of media institutions as constructive and credible actors in challenging settings.

- In Kenya, Search and partners’ media campaign demonstrated a 14 percentage point increase in radio program listeners who believed that both local and national media play a constructive role during electoral periods, rising from 78% to 92%. Similarly, there was a 20 percentage point increase in people trusting information and resources about the elections.

- After media programming in Rwanda (as well as Burundi and DRC), the number of respondents satisfied with how the media informs people about peace, security issues, and regional dynamics increased more than three-fold (from 27% to 93%).

- In the United States, 97% of leaders reported improved connectedness, and 69% reported an improved ability to impact their communities after participating in Search programming. CG-USA convened Creating the Common Good Online to connect faith leaders and bridge-builders in the United States and train them in the most effective methods to reduce polarization and its manifestations in harmful content online.

- In Pakistan, Search’s local media partner convinced the board of studies of the University of Balochistan to integrate dedicated conflict-sensitive journalism seminars and courses into the regular curriculum for the upcoming academic year, initiating the institutionalization of conflict-sensitive journalism. The programming demonstrates how improved legitimacy and relationships can lead to institutional investments that ensure this legitimacy can endure.

In Lebanon, local civil society enhanced its legitimacy by adopting new peacebuilding approaches and skills, including community dialogues and reintegration platforms. This approach was particularly impactful in Al Bab, where two civil society organizations integrated these tools into their work for the first time, demonstrating increased responsiveness and inclusiveness in their peacebuilding efforts.
A range of institutional actors built momentum for youth peace & security and religious engagement, protecting diverse leadership essential to strategies for peace.

- Congressional representatives collaborating with a coalition of peacebuilding organizations co-led by Search reintroduced the U.S. Youth, Peace & Security Act of 2023. The Act improves coordination across government and civil society to support youth peacebuilding and increases recognition and resources for young people’s role in U.S. policy and programming for peace and security.
- Search also convened a community of practice focused on Youth, Peace & Security (YPS) National Action Plans that included government and youth representatives from 29 countries. The Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported this Community of Practice, culminating in an in-person workshop in Helsinki in 2022. The Community of Practice addressed a demand and need from over 35 representatives participating in the Helsinki workshop.
- Search continued co-chairing the Global Coalition on YPS and the global Protection Working Group with the Office of the UN Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth. The coalition includes 140 members and coordinates evidence, practice, and policy to improve youth participation in peace and security. The working group includes over 75 human rights organizations, peacebuilding organizations, youth-led organizations, and intergovernmental bodies. The main focus areas of these structures in 2023 were a multi-stakeholder collaboration on youth-inclusive peace processes and being a go-to mechanism for YPS practitioners to find support for protection and safeguarding issues.
- Building Bridges in Development. USAID’s Strategic Religious Engagement Policy included inputs from Search and partners. It includes peacebuilding as a sector for religious engagement, defines “religious actor” to include women and youth, and recognizes that Freedom of Religion and Beliefs and religious engagement are mutually reinforcing.

Search and partners developed structures to integrate tech and social cohesion as essential components for peace.

- Search and several partners launched the Council on Tech and Social Cohesion, convening members of tech companies, civil society, tech investors, and key figures influencing both government and tech sector policies. It provides a space for developing and expanding technology platforms that improve social cohesion worldwide. There is now also a Bamako Forum on Tech and Social Cohesion, launched to address online polarization by Search.
- They also influenced Meta’s definition of ‘dangerous’ in their latest Dangerous Organizations and Individuals policy update, not encompassing CSOs and civil rights movements advocating for legitimate peace and justice demands in conflict geographies.
- In Sri Lanka, over 200 civil society actors are accessing the benefits from the first professional tracking and data analysis exclusively on gendered online hate speech and cyber sexual and gender-based violence, which Search developed to inform their work supporting victims and survivors. This foundation equipped people to tackle anticipated online harassment and hate speech spikes and influence the private sector operating across the country. Collaboration with global tech companies and civil society to use evidence-based approaches has improved understanding and response to online violence, leading to enhanced actions by technology firms and recognition of diverse online violence forms. After Search’s advocacy efforts, platforms like TikTok and Meta began addressing gender-based violence with response rates over 90+% and 55%, respectively.

Search has continued guarding important commitments for peace in regions where governments are questioning their role.

- Furthermore, the Sahel Civil Society Working Group has seen new active engagement of the secretariats of the EU Partnership for Security and Stability for the Sahel, Sahel Alliance, and Sahel Coalition. Participants of the Working Group agreed on a set of common messages to convey, and there has been an increased and shared recognition of the importance of focusing on the issue of civic space, which was raised as a priority to tackle for the EU.
- The Belgian Sahel strategy also includes several recommendations on conflict sensitivity and social cohesion that Search and partners shared with response rates over 90+% and 55%, respectively.

Success in transforming conflict requires more than on-the-ground programming to impact the drivers of conflict. It also requires global engagement to change how our world thinks and responds to these challenges. High-level institutional commitments from governments, multilaterals, and the private sector all hold policy and funding decisions that influence peace dynamics. International coalitions’ ability to advocate for change and use evidence to direct investments to interventions with the right impact can all hold policy and funding decisions that influence peace dynamics.

Global Impact Evaluation 2023
Early groundwork exists for organizations to speak to their impact across the sector and make a more effective case for peacebuilding, with buy-in from significant institutions.

The Peace Impact Framework was adopted in part or whole by various governments and multilateral organizations. Much of the framework was also included in the impact measurement plans for the United States Government’s Global Fragility Act, shaping impact reporting on all priority countries and regions. Notably, Search collaborated with the government of Niger and the UN Coordinating Office to launch Illimi, a national database of indicators that have incorporated the framework. While the initiative ended with the coup in the middle of 2023, it eventually was finalized and is now active again. Insider Philanthropy, the Chronicle of Philanthropy, and a book on global and local efforts to assess peacebuilding also featured the framework.

In collaboration with USAID and the University of Southern California, Search released a study on the social and economic return of youth-led peacebuilding work finding that for every 1 USD, there is a 5-10 USD return on investment from youth-led peacebuilding programs. The Kenya Private Sector Alliance published a report to build on the initiative and is actively seeking ways to establish a funding mechanism to support youth-led peacebuilding as a result of the research and follow-up advocacy efforts. Inspired by the results, members of Parliament in Cameroon are exploring how they can develop a youth-inclusive national strategy on YPS and have requested a similar study to help Members of Parliament justify their legislative strategy on YPS. Search is working with them to craft the overall plan.

The platform ConnexUs, created by Search for social impact practitioners in conflict contexts, connected over 102,000 visitors from 146 countries in 2023, with the top represented nations being the United States, Kenya, the United Kingdom, Nigeria, and the Philippines. ConnexUs members contributed 3,293 resources, 254 events, and events featuring 28 expert speakers on timely topics, from climate security to atrocity prevention. The Human Rights Support Mechanism Program and Digital Peacebuilding Community of Practice also featured it as a suggested resource.

In 2023, Search rolled out an important research approach for elevating localized priorities for peacebuilding across the organization’s programming in 22 countries. The Grounded Accountability Model enabled 2,470 people living in conflict around the world to co-create peace indicators to guide programs, some of which have been included in this report. Search convened a community of practice in collaboration with Everyday Peace Indicators, Cooperativa del Sur del Cauca, and Asociación Minga, which brought together over 320 practitioners to set standards for defining indicators with communities based on their lived experiences in conflict. Harvard Law School’s Negotiation Journal highlighted the approach this year in its publication.

Reflections & recommendations

This 2023 evaluation of Search’s impact served as a first step to understanding how the Common Ground Approach has been used in recent years as a tool for peace, identifying the most important results achieved and the largest gaps that remain. From evidence across acute, protracted, and latent stages of conflict, there are several important reflections.

First, people’s lived experiences in conflict show that all vital signs are important regardless of the stage of conflict. This challenges some assumptions about what is most needed for communities in crisis and historically marginalized groups. Search and its partners have an impact across all five themes, and that impact aligns with the priorities of people in the places teams work. Teams can continue to develop accountability in this direction with a strong base.

Second, Search works most consistently by increasing the agency of people targeted from marginalized communities and across divides. Much of the work on polarization, violence, legitimacy, and investments incorporates agency and is achieved by that broader community of people both with and without Search’s support.

Third, we can only make conclusions about the impact on participants and secondary targets, meaning populations and institutions directly touched by Search programs. There is not much evidence yet about the impact of this work on the conflict systems as a whole, which is to be expected both because the scale of most programs is set within specified geographic areas or specific institutions, and because no strategy is at the stage where this type of impact is expected.

Programs respond well to the stated needs and priorities of the people they are serving. This is a clear strength of Search and partners’ programming decisions to meet the needs of people. In acute contexts, this often requires a strong focus on key geographic zones to ensure solid engagement throughout a crisis. It may also require a renewed focus on essential services. In protracted stages, country teams and partners challenged systematic marginalization that was driving violence and legitimacy of institutions to provide services for all. Last, in latent contexts programs focused on strong systems and participation of young people, diverse women, and marginalized groups as positive pillars of influence within communities.

One balancing act peacebuilders have long grappled with is the question of justice vs. peace, or if peace includes justice. The answer is clear: peace does not exist without addressing the everyday violence and injustices people experience. In acute contexts, teams focused on consistent commitments and support in key communities with high levels of violence to ensure their work endures and can prevent further violence where possible. In protracted contexts, the focus on specific communities held true, but teams and partners also addressed types of violence experienced by marginalized groups that drive or are at the roots of polarization. In latent contexts, this pattern persisted with additional attention to the legitimacy of institutions ensuring important rights.

The results show, therefore, that agency is a major pathway and often an intermediate outcome in much of the programming: agency to minimize violence, agency to address conflicts, and agency to support the legitimacy of those serving communities. Regardless of what stage a country is in, Search’s work focuses on the agency of partners and local organizations to act. Enabling people to act with the Common Ground Approach embedded into their work was essential, as was the use of the Common Ground Approach to create more space and visibility for them as leaders. And where that visibility extends, we clearly see positive change in polarization, legitimacy, and violence.
Another challenge peacebuilders have grappled with is the burden of proof that peacebuilding works. This evaluation shows consistent positive and promising results for peace with sustained investment. The question is not whether peacebuilding approaches work, but what scale is required for consistent positive progress toward peace. What is mistaken as a lack of evidence is more likely a consistent set of evidence at a specific scale and scope. The apparent limits of these programs in affecting change need to be studied through the lens of a broader strategy to understand failures and successes.

Search’s biggest challenge looking forward is transforming improved legitimacy, polarization and violence into results with a wider scope, and beginning to address more systemic economic and institutional barriers to peace: changing agency, violence, and polarization across broader geographic zones; rolling local and sub-national institutional change into national or even regional collaboration; and beginning to transform sectors and markets that drive conflict, rather than companies or businesses. The methods work. There is no evidence of teams failing consistently at a larger scale - there simply are very few programs at this scale yet. This could be for many reasons. First, most strategies are just now entering the stage at which they should operate at this scale. Second, a broader systemic approach to peace may need different types of programmatic funding and scope. The questions now are how to scale, what support is needed globally to solidify the results achieved, and what to account for to avoid the pitfalls of ever-changing conflict dynamics.

Key recommendations for enduring change

Chart a path from deep investments made in targeted communities toward investment in broader public support for peace.

▶ That path should focus on either popular support or large-scale institutional change, depending on what teams believe needs to come first. It is unlikely that both can take place at once effectively.

▶ This plan should likely be rooted in the expansion of efforts to support the agency of those whom teams and partners have invested in, into collective agendas for lasting peace. Search's approach has been to connect and support local actors making a difference in their communities with a common approach and goals to bind their work. The ripple effect of this work is already clear, so it would be best to build on it and decide with partners what will be most effective in the coming years, whether broader visibility and popular support, institutional reforms, or market changes.

Prepare for acute stages of conflict with consolidated plans to protect peace and populations in pariah states.

▶ Advocacy efforts are already aligned to this and have focused heavily on global support especially to protect government investment in peace in the Sahel in 2023. Humanitarian organizations struggle to aid populations in states accused of abuses without appearing to legitimize those governments. Still, Search has made progress convincing governments in the past, and should continue this approach.

▶ Failure of peace processes poses a particular threat to strategies, shutting down large elements of strategies without clear avenues for future programming. The reasons for this are multiple:

  ▶ Reduced funding: governments and multilaterals shift toward securitized approaches to ‘keep’ peace, or they pull support altogether

  ▶ Peace processes are a product of the buy-in and systems supporting peace. Their failures can also signify popular skepticism in peace agreements or weak systems supporting diverse interests in peace.

Create stronger connection to youth, peace & security and women, peace & security global efforts to set common advocacy goals.

▶ Youth and women have been supported and have mobilized around the world for greater visibility and access, and in many cases they are achieving that access.

▶ A diverse leadership with improved access to institutions should culminate in core institutional change for peace.

▶ Search and partners should also track how the legitimacy of key institutions changes in the eyes of the population, to understand if this approach is setting a foundation for lasting peace.

Search and its partners can increase attention to improve market investments in peace.

▶ At acute and protracted stages, the focus of peacebuilders has been on supporting marginalized groups with better access to economic investment: training, finances, and more.

▶ In latent and protracted stages, teams have begun to target some sectors that heavily influence conflict, but with limited success.

  ▶ Digital Technology and Social Media are core markets to influence in 2024: More than two billion people across 50 countries are expected to go to the polls this year, and the largest global election cycle until 2048 is at risk.22 Combating misinformation and disinformation is a useful approach, but transforming the sector's design of platforms will be crucial for a profound effect.

Review strategies for more accurate timing of objectives and planned milestones.

▶ Include timing to set up operations in new or transitioning geographies. It is clear from the ways that migration and political dynamics have cross-border effects, that it makes sense to work across a conflict geography and not only on individual countries. However, that means set-up and alignment of teams needs to be factored into timelines for impact.

▶ Teams need to account for trends23 in migration, natural and man-made resource scarcity, and the use of new tactics of warfare that can increase acute casualties.

