

## **Transformative Peacebuilding Methods for Institutions, Education Systems and Communities**

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The world is currently grappling with a multitude of unprecedented challenges. These challenges encompass various areas, including climate change, the rise of violent and hateful ideologies, the alarming loss of biodiversity, ongoing conflicts and wars, and the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to these challenges, there is a growing prevalence of mental and psychological health issues that naturally arise as a consequence. These collective challenges demand our attention and require concerted efforts to address them effectively.

“Real world issues are highly ‘psychologized’: contaminated with shared perceptions, thoughts, fantasies, and emotions (both conscious and unconscious) pertaining to past historical glories and traumas (losses, humiliations, mourning difficulties, feelings of entitlement of revenge, and resistance to accepting changed realities)” (Volkan, 1997, 117). Functionally, we are no longer able to talk face-to-face, to communicate at eye level, to “touch” each other. Despite progress in some countries, people with mental health conditions often experience severe human rights violations, discrimination, and stigma...which goes from generation to generation.

To find solutions to these many problems, Nature-Based Dialogue Methods in, and with, nature, can help in healing the heavy burden which is related to our disconnection from nature (Beery et al., 2023). These new methods can then be adapted to the local conflict(s), for a better understanding of people’s needs. They are also an important part of the ‘New Peacebuilding Process’, which means taking alternative actions on social inequality and ecological unsustainability, to create more just and sustainable spaces. In today's world, it is imperative to be able to bring peacebuilding to the many crises that affect our daily lives (Rosales & Davis, 2023) In the process of addressing these challenges, peacebuilding plays a crucial role in preventing violence by fostering inclusiveness and facilitating the development of a shared understanding. There are three primary ways in which peacebuilding contributes to this:

- 1) It supports an inclusive process of just transition that respects the diversity of cultural backgrounds and ethnicity.
- 2) It promotes more “environmentally-friendly” and sustainable behaviors and attitudes among participants.
- 3) It conveys new interpretation of the collective struggle for a common future in different languages, cultures, and sacred places. Here we observe how peacebuilding efforts contribute positively to social innovation and ecological transformation, and through a positive change in the behaviors and actions of the participants (Eke Schneider, 2022).

In implementing this new peacebuilding idea, it is crucial to acknowledge the transformative power of cities and the fact that cities are shared spaces inhabited by people from diverse cultures.

It is widely recognized that nature has a profound impact on our well-being (Jimenez et al., 2021). We also know that Green Spaces can provide mental health benefits and lower the risk

of psychiatric disorders (Engemann et al., 2019). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2021) highlights the need to transform humankind's relationship with nature.

We have witnessed the numerous advantages of having access to parks, green spaces, and community gardens in terms of our mental and physical well-being. These spaces and programs have played a crucial role in connecting diverse communities, encompassing different races, ethnicities, ages, and health statuses, with the wonders of nature (EEA, 2020).

But the part of the problem that has not so far been well-addressed is making the connection of communities **within** communities...to achieve the many other broad-based societal solutions to reduce structural violence. That needs the inclusion of a **Triangle of Actors** to help create a new, and all-important dialogue:

- Institutions (including Environmental, Academic, and Art): Institutions can, and should, play a pioneering role...through the sharing of their knowledge with local school teachers...in building a culture of sustainable and just peace in the classroom, in the school, and in the community.
- Peace Educators: They are best trained/suited to evaluate the needs of the community within the community, and can help design sustainable and just programs accordingly. They usually come from diverse backgrounds, and have a strong bond with their roots and their communities.
- Community-based Teachers: Teachers in the local schools can also play an important peacebuilding role ...for the betterment of all communities in their school district and neighbourhoods.

Only through starting to build programs at the local micro level (individuals and neighbourhoods), and continuing at the meso level (regional), we can scale and reach our broader goals on an international macro level.

In support of this article's learnings and recommendations, relevant micro-level case studies/projects are hereby provided:

### **The Peace Garden<sup>1</sup> (Wuppertal, Germany, 2020)**

This started as a research project in urban transformation...named the Urban Gardening Peace Project<sup>2</sup>. By creating a dialogue with various actors in the city, the idea was implemented with diverse people from Bosnia, the Czech Republic, Syria, and some local representatives of a marginalized community (especially the youth). All of these communities had experienced war, violence, or the destructive effects of Communism. To heal the traumas passed down from generation to generation, the idea of creating a Peace Garden was born. The goal was to reduce violence in their urban environment, with the help of nature.

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<sup>1</sup> Peace Garden is an Avantgardenist approach. It is a new method which works in nature to build an agroecological relationship among plants, humans, and animals, in an experimental, radical, or transformative manner with respect to art, culture and society.

<sup>2</sup> Urban Gardening Peace Project <https://sustainablejustcities.eu/multimedia/project-urban-gardening-peace-project-wuppertal>

The project's Peace Garden used a "nature-based approach" as a Dialogue Method for a sustainable and just future in an urban context. All actors involved were able to meet at eye level – a prerequisite for any transformation. Over time, the Peace Garden became an educational platform for out-of-school methods. Here, these varied groups exchanged knowledge and learned from each other through intercultural and interreligious dialogue...all while growing organic vegetables, fruit, and herbs, and learning about local biodiversity, strengthening the visibility of women and changing consumption behaviours.

After starting this local peacebuilding and education process, not only did the local environment and urban sociology, psychology, architecture, behaviours, and attitudes change... new transformative ideas were also born. Beyond planting herb beds and growing vegetables in the middle of the city, the Peace Garden aimed to improve the levels of mutual respect in relationships, while taking responsibility for a good life for future generations (Eke Schneider, 2022). While the process started with peace science on a micro (individual) level, it led to new ideas and scientific solutions for urban transformation. The 'key learning' from this exercise- the strongest force behind any transformation...was an individual-level force (such as the desire to have a societal impact, develop solutions, or do something valuable and meaningful) (Kump et al., 2023) Additionally, after documentation of the value of this creative and solution-oriented approach, the study became an empirical example for the scientific community in transformation of cities and communities. It has inspired many other actors to use nature for intercultural and interreligious dialogue between parties.

This small initiative in Wuppertal, has now catalyzed a new transformative idea in all of Germany. A Policy Brief Proposal (published during Germany's G7 Presidency in 2022) for achieving sustainable and just cities through building bridges between Institutions, Education Systems, and Communities via a micro-level peacebuilding process, is the first evidence-based solution presented to policy-makers and decision-makers. Also, this year, Germany's Service for Peace Education team introduced the first Model School for Peace Education in the country. The intent is to address a shortcoming in the educational system, now adding a new focus on response competencies to climate change, nature-human connectivity, gender-based problems, and other crisis situations<sup>3</sup>.

### **UNESCO "Exploring Nature-Based Sustainable Livelihoods Through Community Dialogues" (East Rennell, Solomon Islands, 2022)**

This regional program started with an invitation to each local community to carry out a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis. Here they identified existing challenges and opportunities, bringing together key stakeholders (including community representatives, ministries, governments, NGO partners, and other experts) to find ways to move forward on the development of nature-based, sustainable livelihoods. The dialogue sessions covered: identification of challenges and opportunities; sharing of experiences and "lessons learned" from other projects; and the drafting an action plan. While

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<sup>3</sup> In 16. February 2022, an Online-Workshop: "Sustainability and Interreligious Dialogue" has been held in Wuppertal. The workshop explored what potentials religion, spirituality and nature offer in the current transformation of living environments in our cities. In particular, the potentials of dialogue with and between religious centres for a sustainable future was looked at. The focus was on three aspects that are particularly important for the upcoming urban changes: The interaction of different communities in relation to a sustainable future; the issues of mobility; and those of nature-based, culturally sensitive solutions on the ground. The workshop addressed these aspects in several thematically-oriented groups. Representatives from different religious communities as well as the young generation, presented ideas to promote inclusive change and building resilient communities. At the beginning, the award-winning director Nuran David Çalış gave a speech on the topics of transnational identity, spirituality, and the contribution of art to a more just and sustainable future.

the Final Plan has not yet published, this regional bridge-building approach is a good example of how to build trust between all regional parties in taking responsibility for their common future.

### **“Schools4Future”: Nature-Based Urban Transformation through Architecture and Design (Wuppertal, Germany, 2020)**

This project was led by the Wuppertal Institute and Quadrat, and funded by Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action. Since the start of the project in 2020, students from twelve schools throughout Germany have calculated their carbon footprint, developed measures to reduce emissions, and implemented climate protection measures, at their schools. Germany has set the goal of being climate neutral by 2045 at the latest<sup>4</sup>.

Nelson Mandela's words resonate with truth when he emphasized the power of education as a transformative force in the world. However, to tackle the multifaceted challenges of our time, another powerful tool must be harnessed: nature. Fortunately, nature is readily available and accessible to us, offering immense potential. By combining the forces of education and nature, we can unlock innovative scientific approaches to effectively address the pressing needs of our transforming world.

This approach has already been put into practice, in the Peace Garden (Wuppertal) case study outlined above. And based on the Peace Gardens’ study results, we can conclude that the process gave the local participants autonomy, supported personal growth, inspired transformative thinking in a variety of channels, opened spaces in decision-making for women, and created consciousness for a good and just life for all. It was evident during this project, that this was a transformative process for all participants. However, one must not forget that this process needs translation between parties. In this way, transformative peace science can contribute its tools and methods, with dialogue adapted to the local language.

Nature-Based Dialogue Methods do have the capacity to activate the new peacebuilding process. Which, in turn, has the ability to address many of the problems within our communities. We have experimented with this idea in a real-world laboratory, and now its time to go beyond borders.

In summary, this article argues that the creation of informed dialogue between the aforementioned Triangle of Actors (Institutions, Peace Educators, Teachers/Schools), is a roadmap for transformative and intersectional solutions to the myriad of the local Communities’, and the World’s, problems. As such, it calls for a profound re-direction in the activity of these actors, to successfully affect the outside environment. It is imperative that all actors begin this change...now.

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<sup>25</sup> For more information: Schools4Future, <https://schools4future.de/>

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