



WHITAKER PEACE & DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

# Newsletter Spring 2025



FOREWORD FROM WPDl'S  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



EXPLORE WPDl'S COMMITMENT  
TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



THE LUNCH 'N' LEARN SERIES  
IN CALIFORNIA



CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL  
WOMEN'S DAY ACROSS THE WORLD



CEO FOREST WHITAKER'S OPED ON  
WORLD SOCIAL JUSTICE DAY



# Foreword

**Caroline Descombris**

*WPDJ Executive Director*

Dear WPDJ friends,

As our work continues with amplified energy, we are navigating a development landscape that is both dynamic and increasingly complex. After surpassing the milestone of reaching 2.3 million people through our programs since our inception in 2012, we, like many organizations in our sector, now face an unprecedented funding crisis. Yet, even as we strive to sustain our presence in Chiapas, Mexico, and the Adjumani district of Uganda, our commitment to driving meaningful, lasting change in our communities remains stronger than ever.

This moment has brought our mission into sharper focus. These funding pressures are not just challenges to overcome—they are powerful reminders of the urgency of our work and of the resilience of the communities we serve. In response, we have redoubled our efforts: adapting to changing conditions, innovating where it matters most, and standing steadfast with those who rely on our support. Above all, it is the unwavering support of our partners and broader community that empowers us to move forward, turning adversity into resolve, and constraint into momentum.

Despite these pressures, this newsletter highlights how our initiatives are becoming more integrated, with environmental policy and climate strategy taking on an expanded and increasingly central role. New partnerships are also opening fresh horizons for transformative action, enabling us to deepen our impact where it's needed most.

This season, we are proud to spotlight our ongoing efforts to advance environmental sustainability and promote economic stability. In South Sudan and Uganda, our Green Livelihoods and Smart Agriculture programs continue to support communities through sustainable practices and innovative approaches that strengthen both ecosystems and local economies.

Our Women's Livelihood Program, designed to foster gender equality and economic empowerment, continues to make meaningful progress in the areas where it is active. This initiative reaffirms our belief in the capacity of communities—and women in particular—to uplift themselves through sustainable livelihoods. It underscores our enduring commitment to equity and shared prosperity in every region where we operate.

With fieldwork at the heart of all we do, the progress shared in this edition reflects our unwavering dedication to grassroots engagement and to building a more resilient future for all.

Thank you for walking this path with us. Your continued support makes our mission possible—and brings us closer to a more peaceful and prosperous world.

In peace,  
Caroline Descombris



## WPDl's 2024 General Report

### *Hope and Resilience in Motion*

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In 2024, **WPDl surpassed the 2.3 million people reached since our founding, empowering youth, women, and communities to shape peace and development from within.** Our [2024 General Report](#) is a powerful chronicle of impact in fragile and underserved regions across Africa, the Americas, and Europe, driven by one belief: peace is a skill that everyone can learn.

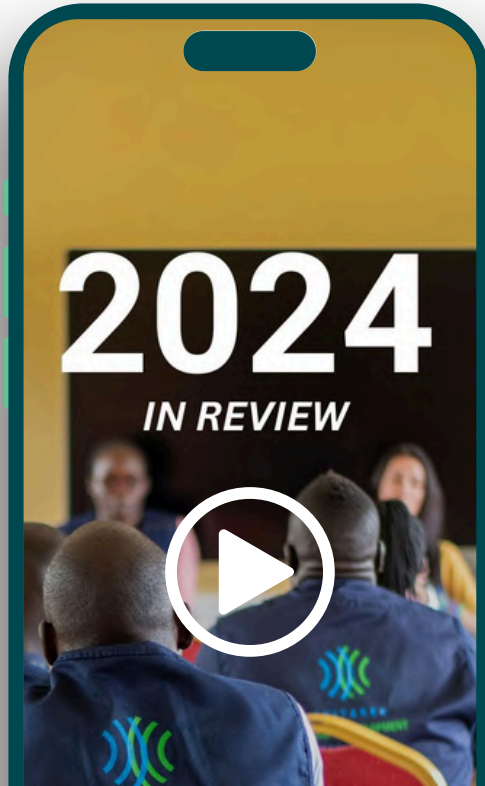
#### **What's inside the [2024 Report](#)?**

Our work this year was guided by four pillars—*Peacebuilding, Livelihood, Health and Well-being, and Sports*—and powered by **local champions**.

#### **Highlights from the Report Include:**

- In 2024, our programs reached a total of 376,025 beneficiaries.
- 164,676 beneficiaries participated in peacebuilding efforts, including 2,248 Youth Peacemakers who led 93 community dialogues and helped strengthen the leadership skills of 1,753 local leaders across fragile regions.
- 33,975 students in 299 schools participated in our peace education program, and over 2,000 teachers, parents, and administrators were trained in conflict resolution.
- Expansion of trauma healing and mental health services, including programs in South African prisons, refugee settlements in Uganda, and community centers in South Sudan.
- 57,226 individuals were supported through livelihood programs, with vocational training offered in business, ICT, and the arts. WPDl helped launch 308 new businesses, maintaining an 88% survival rate two years after launch.
- Climate-conscious innovation, including new green business models, school tree planting, and expanded environmental curricula.
- Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in five countries served more than 62,000 visitors—providing internet access, vocational training, cultural activities, and health services.
- Our Peace through Sports programs reached 135,000+ participants, using teamwork and play to build trust, bridge divides, and foster inclusion.

***Click to watch our 2024 video recap  
and explore the full General Report:***



*“WPDI stands out as one of the foremost organizations supporting the Ministry of Peacebuilding and the people of South Sudan. We recognize and appreciate the significant contributions WPDI has made through impactful Community Dialogues and peace conferences. These initiatives have empowered our communities and fostered a climate of relative peace. We are grateful for their unwavering commitment to our shared goals.”*

**Hon. Gerald Francis,  
Minister of Peacebuilding, South Sudan**







## Honoring the Earth, Empowering Communities:

*WPDI's commitment to peace, resilience, and a sustainable future*

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At WPDI, **we believe that peace and environmental sustainability are deeply interconnected**. Environmental degradation fuels conflict, and fragile states often suffer most from ecological threats. In 2023, we began an ecological recast of our strategy to respond to the pressing need for integrated action on peace and the planet. As we marked Earth Day 2025, we reaffirmed our commitment to this vision: one in which climate resilience and community empowerment go hand in hand.

Environmental concerns are not just global—they are local, urgent, and intertwined with the daily lives of the communities WPDI serves. In regions affected by conflict, environmental stressors like land degradation, deforestation, and climate shocks exacerbate fragility. At WPDI, we are working to transform these risks into opportunities for cooperation, resilience, and peace. Our strategic framework, informed by the Institute for Economics and Peace, positions **peacebuilding as a critical missing link in global environmental action**. By engaging youth and vulnerable populations, we foster resilience where it's needed most.

### ***Our Climate & Environment Policy***

In 2024, WPDI formally adopted an organization-wide Climate & Environment Policy, embedding sustainability into our internal operations. It includes:

- *Sustainability by design*: Environmental considerations are integrated into all program planning and execution.
- *Eco-conscious procurement*: We prioritize sustainable vendors and materials with a low environmental impact.
- *Greening our infrastructure*: Solar power, energy efficiency, and waste reduction are central to how we operate our Community Learning Centers.
- *Climate education*: Staff and youth are trained in environmental stewardship and the SDGs.

**This policy is about walking the talk - ensuring our values are reflected in how we work, not just what we do.**

## Environmental Strategy in Action

Beyond internal commitments, WPDI is implementing a dynamic environmental strategy across our programs. From South Sudan to Uganda, young people are being empowered as climate leaders and peacebuilders.

### ***South Sudan: Greening Livelihoods through Innovation***

In partnership with Zain, WPDI launched “Enhancing Corporate Sustainability Strategies in South Sudan,” a pioneering program integrating green entrepreneurship, digital inclusion, and environmental education. Youth and women are establishing school environmental clubs and launching tree-planting campaigns, as well as eco-friendly businesses supported by seed funding and mentorship, and gaining access to solar-powered digital tools for education and economic opportunities. This initiative exemplifies how climate action can also drive economic and social resilience.

### ***Uganda: Empowering Women for Climate Peace***

In Uganda, our collaboration with UN Women is equipping young women to lead local efforts on climate resilience, economic empowerment, and community dialogue. These initiatives amplify the voices of those often excluded from climate conversations, fostering inclusive solutions grounded in local knowledge and leadership.

### ***A Just and Sustainable Future***

Our future depends on forging peace not only among people but also with the planet. WPDI is committed to advancing **environmental justice as a foundation for sustainable peace** through programs that are green by design and rooted in the lived experiences of the communities we serve. From youth-led dialogues to climate-smart businesses, we are planting the seeds of a better world.





## Domestic Harmonizer Program Expands with new Lunch 'N' Learn series

*Nurturing Emotional Intelligence, One Meal at a Time*

In November 2024, WPDJ's Domestic Harmonizer Program (DHP) in the Greater Los Angeles area launched an exciting new initiative, its first-ever Lunch 'N' Learn series. Designed to integrate Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into elementary and middle schools in a fresh and engaging way, the program aims to deepen students' understanding of self-awareness, emotional regulation, relationship-building, and more. Given its overwhelming success, the Lunch 'N' Learn series has now become a permanent feature across all partner schools.

SEL equips young people with essential life skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. While DHP has long delivered SEL-based programming through its Inner Spark initiative at the high school level, the Lunch 'N' Learn series extends this impact to younger students, offering an engaging space for meaningful connection and skill-building beyond classroom instruction and peer mediation programs.

### **Positive Reception Across Partner Schools:**

*"The Domestic Harmonizer Program's Lunch 'N' Learn series has been very well received at our school by students and staff. Our students were excited to see Ms. Karen and Ms. Monya during our kindness activity and absolutely LOVED the kindness lollipops they created!"*

*Ms. Mercedes Rodriguez-Garcia, K-8 Counselor at William Orr Elementary School*



## Building Emotional Regulation Through Interactive Tools

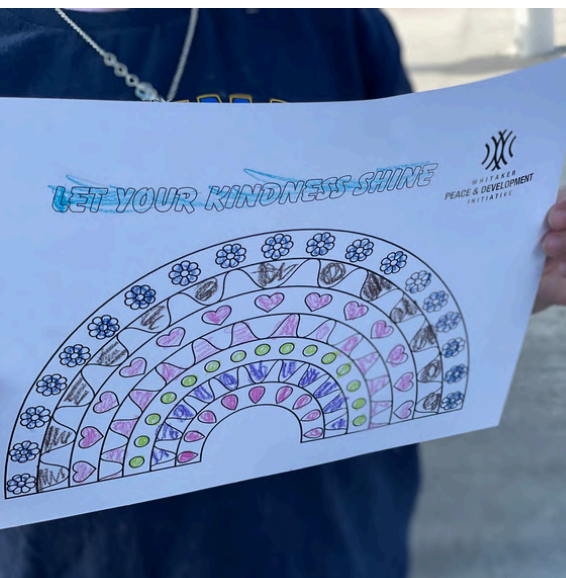
The pilot series launched last fall, focusing on themes of kindness and gratitude. Students engaged in hands-on, purpose-driven activities during their lunch break—decorating more than 125 paper grocery bags with heartfelt messages of peace and encouragement. These bags were donated to the Foodbank of Southern California in Long Beach, bringing smiles and warmth to community members in need.

In other sessions, students were guided through the “Calm Palm” breathing technique, a grounding exercise that teaches emotional regulation by tracing one’s hand while practicing slow, mindful breaths. The sessions concluded with an interactive “telephone” game, highlighting the importance of clear communication, active listening, and empathy.

At a local middle school, students crafted thank-you cards for friends and family, fostering a culture of appreciation. By January and February, the series had expanded to cover new topics, including kindness and love for those who inspire us. More than 100 students from kindergarten to 4th grade participated, creating colorful hearts to honor the people they cherish.

Looking ahead, the Lunch ‘N Learn series will align with monthly school themes, building a flexible yet structured SEL curriculum that evolves with students’ needs. Future topics will include gratitude, friendship, growth mindset, emotional regulation, responsible decision-making, and the journey to becoming our best selves.

With each session, WPDI is not only teaching students how to understand and express their emotions, but they’re also helping to build a more compassionate, peaceful, and connected world. The success of this pilot proves that even small moments, like a lunch break, can become powerful opportunities for growth, healing, and change.







## Celebrating International Women's Day: *Where Women Rise, Communities Thrive*

***When women are empowered, they uplift entire communities, driving progress and creating lasting change.***

On March 8, WPD joined the global community in marking International Women's Day 2025. This year's theme, Accelerate Action, called on all of us to move beyond awareness and toward meaningful, measurable progress in the fight for gender equality. WPD believes that investing in women is investing in a more peaceful future. Through our education, entrepreneurship, and leadership training programs, we equip women with the skills and opportunities to drive change in their communities. Whether in conflict-affected regions or underserved areas, we ensure that women have the resources to lead, innovate, and inspire.

### **A Global Message of Empowerment:**

In a special video message, WPD Founder and CEO Forest Whitaker, Executive Director Caroline Descombris, and team members across our global programs reflected on how we are actively empowering women to become agents of peace and progress.

Watch the full message and hear how we're turning commitment into action:



# Celebrating International Women's Day Across the World

## Spotlight on Uganda: *Dialogue, Advocacy, and Action for Gender Equality*

### *In the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement:*

WPDI organized a powerful Community Dialogue that brought together 51 refugee women leaders and male allies from across the settlement. The gathering created a safe and open space for participants to share personal stories, discuss ongoing barriers, and co-create solutions for advancing gender equality in their communities. Topics ranged from access to education and healthcare to ending gender-based violence and expanding economic opportunities for women. With guidance from WPDI facilitators, the women reflected on the importance of their role as changemakers, not only within the refugee settlement but in the broader peacebuilding process across Uganda.

***"I have realized that I am powerful and can transform my community," shared one participant. "I am no longer a victim of circumstance, I am a leader in progress." The event reaffirmed WPDI's commitment to empowering displaced women through dialogue, solidarity, and skill-building and served as a catalyst for grassroots leadership and resilience."***

### *In Gulu City:*

Meanwhile, in Gulu, WPDI launched a vibrant advocacy campaign to champion women's rights and leadership as core components of peace and development. Held in partnership with local youth, educators, and community leaders, the campaign mobilized residents through speeches, performances, and community outreach.

At the heart of the event was a simple but powerful message: Accelerate Action. Women of all ages spoke about their lived experiences, their visions for a more equitable future, and their refusal to stay silent in the face of injustice. Their courage ignited hope and momentum.

One participant reflected:

***"When I saw young women confidently speaking about their rights, I knew change is possible. This isn't just a celebration - it's a call to action."***



## **A Mother's Voice, A Community's Strength**

*Reflections from Victoria, a Single Mother in Torit County, South Sudan on International Women's Day*

In Torit County, Eastern Equatoria State, International Women's Day was marked with a meaningful community advocacy dialogue—an event designed to elevate the voices of women and girls, raise awareness on local challenges, and promote peace and girls' education.

The gathering brought together women participants from WPDI's training programs at the Torit Community Learning Center (CLC), along with a few invited local leaders, WPDI staff, and Youth Peacemakers. The event was both reflective and empowering. It featured discussions on women's rights, girls' education, and economic empowerment, all framed by WPDI's ongoing efforts to support women as peacebuilders and changemakers.

Among the participants was Victoria, a resilient single mother and entrepreneur. For Victoria, the day was more than symbolic, it was personal. As she gathered with fellow women from the program, she reflected on the challenges they all face: raising children, supporting families, and striving for progress in a society where gender inequality remains deeply rooted. ***"It reminded me that we're not alone in this,"*** she shared. ***"We all carry similar burdens—and together, we can be stronger."***

The event also featured speeches from local leaders and open conversations, allowing women to voice their concerns about girls' education and economic opportunities for mothers. Another highlight was a traditional dance by Victoria's daughter, symbolizing cultural pride and generational progress. For Victoria, it was an emotional moment: her daughter had opportunities she never did, making this celebration a testament to their journey.

As the day drew to a close, Victoria emphasized the importance of ongoing support for single mothers, improved access to resources, and additional platforms for women to advocate for themselves and their daughters. She sees events like this as essential tools for community mobilization and awareness. This local dialogue reflects WPDI's mission in Torit and beyond: to ensure every woman and girl can learn, lead, and live with dignity.







## In His Own Words:

### *CEO Forest Whitaker on World Social Justice Day, Building Justice from the Ground Up*

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Around the world, too many communities are denied access to peace, opportunity, and dignity simply because of where they live or the conflicts they've inherited. For Forest Whitaker, this truth became impossible to ignore after a transformative visit to Northern Uganda, where he met former child soldiers and youth who had endured the trauma of war. **What struck him most wasn't just the hardship, but the hope.** The desire of young people was not to be saved, but to be equipped with the tools to rebuild their lives.

That experience inspired him to found the Whitaker Peace & Development Initiative (WPDI), grounded in the belief that lasting peace and justice must be locally led. Through WPDI, Forest works alongside youth in conflict-affected communities, supporting them with education, mental health resources, entrepreneurship training, and conflict resolution tools.

On World Day of Social Justice, Forest shared these convictions in an [op-ed](#), calling for a shift from charity to empowerment, from temporary aid to long-term transformation. As he wrote, true justice isn't something delivered from above. It grows from within communities when people are given the means to shape their own futures.

Today, and every day, we stand with those working to turn resilience into opportunity, and conflict into peace.

*"If we want a just society, we must do more than redistribute resources. We must create pathways for every individual to demonstrate their value and capacity for change. This means **investing in education, prioritizing mental health, and fostering bottom-up innovation** that empowers communities to take charge of their own destinies."*

*Forest Whitaker, WPDI Founder and CEO*



## **Thank you to our partners!**

As we reflect on the progress and challenges of 2025 so far, we are deeply grateful for the continued support of our partners around the world.

Thanks to their unwavering commitment to peacebuilding, WPDl has been able to reach new regions, support vulnerable communities, and help create sustainable livelihoods through entrepreneurship.

Their partnership is vital to our success, and together, we are building lasting foundations for peace and a brighter future for those we serve. We thank them for standing with us.

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