



## WHITAKER PEACE & DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE Newsletter Summer 2025



**FOREWORD FROM WPDİ'S  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**



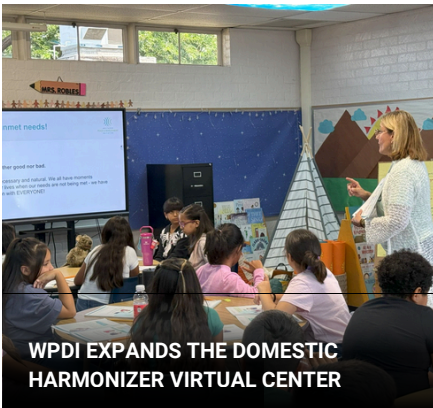
**BREAKING CYCLES AND BUILDING  
FUTURES IN THE CAPE FLATS**



**EXPLORE WPDİ SUMMER CAMPS  
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**ECHOES OF THE LAND:  
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# Foreword

**Caroline Descombris**

*WPDJ Executive Director*

Dear Friends,

As summer closes, I am reminded of what this season represents for WPDJ: growth, renewal, and collective action. Across our programs, young people and communities have come together to learn, share, and create new possibilities for the future—showing us that even in uncertain times, the seeds of peace and resilience take root.

This spirit guided our work in recent months. On World Youth Skills Day, we celebrated the extraordinary capacity of young people to lead, innovate, and inspire. Their voices remind us that peace is not delivered from outside, but cultivated within communities. In September, we marked the International Day of Peace, amplifying the lived experiences of our beneficiaries and the tireless efforts of our country teams. The UN's theme—"Act Now for a Peaceful World"—was a call to action: peace grows from daily acts of learning, cooperation, and compassion, and it needs our active commitment in support, advocacy, and giving.

We are mindful, too, of the challenges ahead. Around the world, resources are shrinking even as needs grow. At WPDJ, we pride ourselves on maximizing impact despite constraints, but our work relies on the solidarity of partners, the generosity of supporters, and the agility of our staff. Your belief in our mission makes all the difference, it enables us to empower youth, support educators, and advance peace where it is needed most.

**Together, we are proving that even in uncertain times, peace can flourish when communities are trusted, supported, and equipped with the skills to lead the way.**

With gratitude,

Caroline Descombris  
WPDJ Executive Director



## Summer Camps Across Three Continents: *Empowering Young Leaders for a Global Future*

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This summer, WPDl created safe and inspiring spaces for children across three continents to learn, create, and grow. From exploring solar-powered toy cars in Mexico to practicing peace through art in South Africa, and training as peer mediators in the United States, these camps demonstrated how much young people can achieve when given the chance to learn new skills in a supportive environment.

In **South Africa**, our School Holiday Program at the Bridgetown Community Centre in Cape Town provided a safe space for 85 children during the school break. Supported by BNP Paribas and RCS Group, the program blended creative activities with sessions on peace, empathy, and conflict resolution. Ten-year-old Aaliyah reflected: *"My favorite part was the art because I could show what peace means to me. I also made new friends and learnt how to solve fights using my words."*

In **Mexico**, our Community Learning Center in Tijuana welcomed 16 boys and girls to take part in ICT workshops supported by the Telmex Foundation. Over two sessions, children learned the fundamentals of circuits, electricity, and renewable energy—building solar-powered toy cars and lamps that lit up automatically at night. Parents also stayed to discover more about WPDl's programs, with some enrolling in upcoming trainings. One young participant, Evan, shared: *"I really liked learning about electricity and playing with other children with things that could be useful at home. I hope there are many more activities to come."*

Meanwhile, in the **United States**, WPDl's Domestic Harmonizer Program launched peer mediation trainings in Los Angeles just before the new school year started, thanks to support from Bank of Montreal and Verizon. At Cresson Elementary, students chose to spend their last days of summer break developing skills to listen, lead, and resolve conflicts peacefully—one student even celebrated his birthday at the training with classmates.

Together, these programs highlight the heart of WPDl's mission as we strive to empower the next generation with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to shape more peaceful and sustainable communities. We are grateful to our partners and supporters who make these moments possible, and we look forward to continuing to expand these opportunities for children worldwide.





## Breaking Cycles and Building Futures: *Cultivating Pathways of Hope*

This summer, we sat down with our South Africa team to talk about the daily realities of working in Cape Town's Cape Flats; an area where cycles of violence, poverty, and marginalization continue to echo the legacy of apartheid.

*"They weren't born violent," said Country Coordinator Dr. Chance Chagunda. "They can unlearn it. But only if we invest in the tools to help them do so."*

That belief is central to WPD's approach. Through our four pillars, Peacebuilding, Livelihood, Health & Well-being, and Sports, our South Africa team is tackling the roots of violence, not just its symptoms.

In recent months:

- A mother who had experienced profound personal loss used her WPD conflict resolution training to intervene during a tense moment in her community. By choosing dialogue over silence, she helped calm the situation and showed how everyday acts of courage can combat structural violence.
- At our Community Learning Center in Athlone, 88% of graduates from a recent summer ICT training found employment. As trainer Steffne Hughes shared, *"They get to feel powerful for something they did on their own, for the first time."*
- Sports programs have provided safe spaces for young people to gather, learn discipline, and connect with opportunities beyond the streets. *"If they're not on the court, they're on the corner,"* Dr. Chagunda reminded us.

These are not isolated successes, they are signs that cycles of violence can be broken. By creating safe spaces, offering real economic alternatives, and addressing trauma, WPD is helping young people imagine and build futures beyond violence.

As Dr. Chagunda put it: *"The real antidote is the resilience of the community. A thriving, empowered community where opportunity outweighs desperation, and where every young person can see a future for themselves and others."*

**Read the full piece here:** [www.wpd.org/news/breaking-cycles-building-futures-combating-daily-violence-in-the-cape-flats/](http://www.wpd.org/news/breaking-cycles-building-futures-combating-daily-violence-in-the-cape-flats/)





## Celebrating International Youth Skills Day: *Honoring Young Leaders Driving Change*

On July 15, WPDI joined the global community in marking **International Youth Skills Day** under the theme *Peace, Taught and Lived*. For WPDI, this day was an opportunity to showcase how young people across our programs are using the skills they have learned to transform their lives and communities.

As part of the celebration, we released a special video featuring youth voices from around the world. From starting businesses and mediating conflicts to leading in their neighborhoods, WPDI youth shared how the skills they've gained have given them confidence, resilience, and hope for the future. The video aimed to reveal that, when young people are equipped with the right tools, they can become powerful agents of change; they are able to build bridges, resolve tensions, and create opportunities not just for themselves, but for those around them.

**International Youth Skills Day reaffirmed what is at the core of WPDI's mission: peace is a skill, and when taught and lived, it has the power to transform entire communities.**





## WPDI Expands the Virtual Center: *Bringing Fresh Content to Support Educators*

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WPDI is proud to announce a major expansion of the Domestic Harmonizer Virtual Center, our free online hub for social-emotional learning (SEL) and peace education. Designed for students, educators, and families, the Virtual Center now offers a wide range of new resources to strengthen communication, problem-solving, and emotional awareness.

Among the new additions are seven original videos on powerful SEL concepts such as shadow work, cognitive restructuring, and Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT). Grounded in research on neuroplasticity, these videos combine storytelling with practical exercises, helping learners reframe challenges, regulate emotions, and build healthier relationships. The update also includes refreshed peer mediation guides from elementary through high school, an enhanced Inner Spark Leadership Manual, and new resources such as a Conflict Coaching Manual for Schools and a Transformative SEL Facilitator's Guide to support classrooms throughout the year. For the first time, parents also now have a dedicated hub within the Virtual Center, offering tools to strengthen communication, conflict resolution, and emotional support at home. This ensures that families, as well as schools, can benefit from accessible and practical peace education resources.

Educators have already praised the impact of these updates. *"This training was practical and full of ideas that can be utilized immediately,"* said Laura Dawson of Grossmont High School. *"Karen DeVoogd (WPDI's Conflict Resolution Education Trainer), was a fun, knowledgeable, and skilled trainer who created a warm and welcoming environment."* In a world where empathy and conflict resolution are more vital than ever, WPDI is proud to reaffirm its commitment to equipping schools and families with transformative resources that make peacebuilding a daily practice, made possible through the support of sponsors like Version and BMO.

**Explore the new content at [www.domesticharmonizer.org/](http://www.domesticharmonizer.org/)**



## Building a More Sustainable Future: *Scaling climate-smart solutions for peace and resilience*

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On Earth Day last year, WPDl pledged to place sustainability at the heart of our mission, recognizing that peace and a healthy planet are inseparable. Since then, we have been working to ensure that the communities we serve are not only equipped with the skills to prevent conflict but also with the tools to adapt to the realities of climate change.

Our Climate-Smart Agriculture Program in Uganda has been central to this vision. Over the past years, it has helped thousands of young people and women develop skills to launch small businesses, create jobs, and strengthen local economies. The program has proven that when communities are given opportunities to thrive, they can also become champions for peace. We are now proud to share that this work is evolving into the *Green Futures* project, made possible by the generous support of the Swedish Postcode Foundation.

By building on the previous successes, *Green Futures* will not only train communities in climate-smart livelihood practices but will also seek to discover **how sustainable business models can reduce conflict risks, strengthen food security, and create new opportunities for women in rural Uganda**. Through this project, we aim to identify the most effective strategies for helping communities adapt to climate change while safeguarding natural resources, and to scale these strategies to benefit other regions.

In this way, *Green Futures* is both a continuation and an innovation. It will help participants build sustainable incomes, whether through renewable energy, green agriculture, or eco-friendly enterprises, while generating insights about the deep connections between climate resilience and peace.

We are deeply grateful to the Swedish Postcode Foundation for their commitment to taking this project forward. Their partnership not only sustains vital programming on the ground but also strengthens WPDl's broader pledge to a more sustainable future for all.





## Echoes of the Land:

### *Empowering Indigenous Youth and Women*

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In the heart of Chiapas, Mexico, Indigenous communities are redefining resilience, creativity, and peace with WPDI's support. From rural schools to bustling neighborhood centers, our programs help communities preserve cultural identity while building economic and social opportunities.

Around San Cristóbal de las Casas, students who speak Indigenous mother tongues are receiving ICT training at basic, intermediate, and advanced levels, thanks to trainers who travel directly to schools on the outskirts of the city. These initiatives ensure that even the most remote communities have access to digital literacy, a critical skill for the 21st century.

In Teopisca, Indigenous youth and women engage in social entrepreneurship and business programs at the Benito Juárez University of Wellbeing. Agroecology students develop sustainable projects under the guidance of university teachers, while Indigenous women receive seed capital to launch their own small businesses. These initiatives strengthen both community resilience and cultural heritage.

Art also plays a central role. Through Cinema for Peace workshops, young people explore storytelling and film as tools for fostering dialogue, resolving conflicts, and building community. **In the northern zone of San Cristóbal—where nearly 90% of residents are Indigenous and many have been forcibly displaced—summer workshops offer children and youth creative spaces that nurture peace, collaboration, and personal growth.**

WPDI's Youth Peacemaker Program spans 12 municipalities in Chiapas, equipping 42 Indigenous youth leaders with the skills to educate others, amplifying the impact of WPDI's work across the region.



One standout is Lielman, a young artist from Tila who now runs a community shop showcasing local artisans while mentoring four peers. Dany, another peacemaker, runs a regional-fabric shoe business that supports 35 artisan families—over 400 people. And Olga, a fellow peacemaker, is preserving textile traditions while creating opportunities for 20 women in her community.

Another example is Adelaida Bolom, a Youth Peacemaker from Chiapas. Adelaida is a proud Mayan Tzeltal woman and a leader who represents her people through her work to promote environmental conservation, agroecology, and a deep connection to the land, rooted in her indigenous cultural values:

“Hello, my name is Adelaida Bolom, I am an Indigenous Mayan Tzeltal woman from the jungle area of Chiapas in Southern Mexico. My community is surrounded by natural landscapes and people who follow the cultural customs of our ancestors. I am part of the group Kaluma Kanana Lum Antsetik (KALUMA – Women Defenders of the Territory). I am working to promote agroecology and the leadership of more indigenous women, thus creating spaces of peace and harmony in our bodies and territories. One of the biggest challenges is to have a space (a piece of land) for a long time. People have told me, why do I want a piece of land if I am a woman... Now in KALUMA, we have achieved, in collaboration with WPDI, to have our community garden. This allows us to continue working our indigenous roots and empowers us as women who care for and maintain the territory.



Fulfilling the ambitions behind our work, such programs do more than teach skills: they honor the deep connection between people and their land. That connection is beautifully expressed in the words of the local Indigenous community:

*"Li k'opojel ta stojol li balamil taje, j-k'opojel ta stojol j-me'tik.  
Li k'opojel ta stojol j-k'in, j-me'tike, j-ch'ulelale."*

*(The word of this land is the word of our mother.  
The word of our sun, of our mother, of our soul.)*



## Celebrating International Day of Peace: *Honoring the courage of communities choosing hope*

Peace is not built in a day, it is built every day, through practice, through learning and teaching, and through positive engagement with our peers. At the Whitaker Peace & Development Initiative, our leaders and participants embody this truth, drawing on their experiences to show what it truly means to build peace.

For this International Day of Peace, we are proud to share **“10 Lessons About Peace”** directly from WPDl’s leaders and participants. These reflections come from those on the frontlines of change: youth, women, teachers, and local leaders who are turning dialogue, resilience, and hope into daily action.

Watch the International Day of Peace video to see these lessons brought to life by peacemakers themselves. As you watch, we invite you to not only hear these lessons but also join us in carrying them forward!







## In His Own Words: CEO Forest Whitaker on the Courage that Peace Demands

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Around the world, millions of people live under the shadow of violence, displacement, and inequality. For Forest Whitaker, these realities are not distant statistics but lived truths he has witnessed firsthand in conflict-affected communities, from South Sudan to South Africa, Uganda to Chiapas. What has always struck him most is not only the scale of hardship, but the strength of hope.

On the International Day of Peace, the United Nations calls on us to “Act Now for a Peaceful World.” For Forest, this is more than a theme—it is a mandate. Peace is not a passive ideal. It is built each day through the choices we make, the words we speak, and the courage we summon to confront division, hate, and despair.

That belief inspired him to found the Whitaker Peace & Development Initiative, rooted in the conviction that peace must be locally led. Across continents, WPDI works alongside young people and community leaders, equipping them with the skills to mediate conflicts, launch businesses, safeguard the environment, and build resilience in the face of war and climate change.

As Forest Whitaker reminds us, “*Courage is what peace demands of us.*” On this International Day of Peace, we honor the courage of ordinary people who choose creation over destruction, dialogue over violence, and hope over fear. Today, and every day, WPDI stands with those working to transform conflict into peace and possibility into progress.

**Read the full op-ed here:** [www.wpdi.org/news/act-now-for-a-peaceful-world/](http://www.wpdi.org/news/act-now-for-a-peaceful-world/)

*“Peace is not a passive ideal. It is built each day through the choices we make, the words we speak, and the courage we summon to confront division, hate, and despair.”*

*Forest Whitaker, WPDI Founder and CEO*



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

As we enter into the fall season, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to our partners around the world for their continued support.

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.

Whitaker Peace & Development Initiative  
17777 Center Court Drive N. Suite 600.  
Cerritos, CA 90703

[wpdi.org](http://wpdi.org)  
[info@wpdi.org](mailto:info@wpdi.org)