

ASPIRING PEACEBUILDERS SEMINAR 2025 REPORT



The Aspiring Peacebuilders Seminar hosted ten promising future peacebuilders in Washington, DC from May 30th, to June 18th 2025. Participants concluded with a presentation and prospectus on a project addressing conflict in South Sudan.

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The 2025 APS Cohort



Annabella Di Napoli, The George Washington University, 2025

Manya Gupta, The George Washington University, 2027

Anshra Malik, The George Washington University, 2027

Leila Afshari, The George Washington University, 2026

Elliana Chambers, The George Washington University, 2025

Katerina Henjes, The George Washington University, 2025

Bohan Chen, The George Washington University, 2025

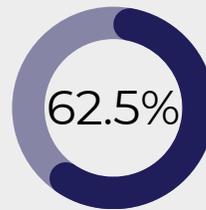
Clemencia Dane, The George Washington University, 2027

Anna Oestreich, The George Washington University, 2027

Sophie Leinenkugel, The George Washington University, 2027

PROGRAM OUTCOME AND SUCCESS

At the conclusion of the three-week long intensive seminar, participants showed clear growth in their knowledge of peacebuilding, as well as gaining a network of professionals in peace and technology fields.



Participants report that the density of their professional peacebuilding networks increased by 62.5% from the beginning of the program to an end.



On average, participant's knowledge of opportunities in the peacebuilding field increased by 52%.



Our data suggest that participants' confidence in the peacebuilding subject increasing by 23.53%.



“Context is everything. In order to excel in this field, and also approach problems meaningfully, especially in another society or culture, you must learn everything you can, work with community members, work on-the-ground, research, speak to people, and repeat. Although you may never understand a society to the fullest and deepest extent, I think it's important to try your hardest and foster meaningful collaborations, partnerships, and friendship. Trust is a major part of pertinent dialogue to help you project/solution succeed. I think people can come into the field of peacebuilding, look at an issue, and make a solution; however, many people cannot understand the cultural implications, hierarchies, and practices embedded into a community and then create a solution having those in mind. It's extremely difficult and convoluted, so exposure to these things now, means that we will be set up better for future endeavors.”

- **Sophia Leinenkugel**

QUOTES FROM OUR SPEAKERS



"The participants were truly incredible, asking thoughtful and insightful questions. I am certain that they will do well in their respective chosen fields in the future. I am honored to have been asked to speak at the seminar."

- Dr Eirliani Abdul Rahman

"I was blown away by the cohort's enthusiasm and attention to detail. During my one-hour lecture, I was expecting a few to turn to Social Media for entertainment midway through, but to my pleasant surprise, everyone was fully engaged to the very end. Their knowledge of South Sudan in general and Jonglei state in particular was simply over the top. This, perhaps also speak to the job that Charles, Mannat, and the entire team has done. It was such an honor to cross paths with members of this group. They are on course to do great things for humanity in the conflict resolution space."

- Isaac K. Gang



"APS was a positive experience from the first letter of invitation to the closing sentence. There was nothing average about this program. The leadership team, the brilliant women, and Dr. Davidson lead with love and excellence. It was a joy to participate in this very important program!"

- Cosette Dixon

QUOTES FROM OUR SPEAKERS

"It was such a privilege getting to lead a session for the Aspiring Peacebuilders Seminar and getting to meet these amazing 2025 Fellows. That the participants' key project focuses on my home country of South Sudan was truly humbling and exciting for me. They asked excellent questions and have thought so well about the challenges and opportunities their project would face. We know the future of peacebuilding is challenging, but it is also bright with engaged global citizens who think the way these participants do."

- Dr. Sandra Tombe



"Working with these Aspiring Peacebuilders demonstrated the incredible potential when we merge technological innovation with peacebuilding expertise. These emerging leaders showed remarkable ability to harness tools for conflict resolution while maintaining focus on the human elements that make peace sustainable. Through their project work, they proved that technology isn't just a tool for peace - it's a catalyst for transformative solutions that can bridge divides and create lasting impact in communities worldwide. Their fresh perspectives on PeaceTech applications represent exactly the kind of innovative thinking our field needs."

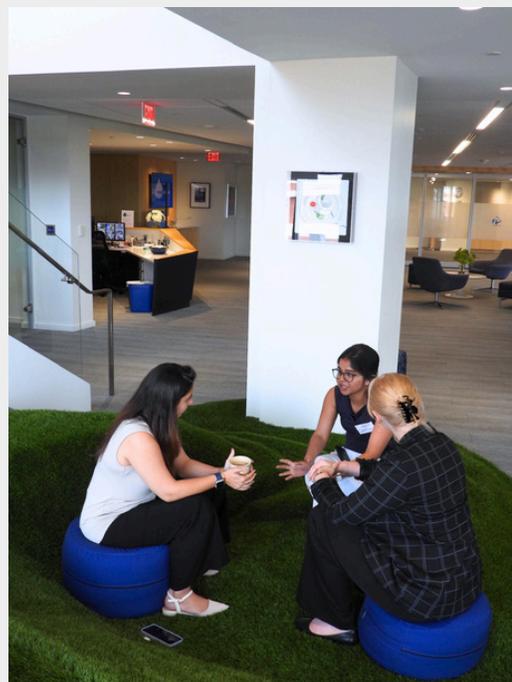
- Dr. John DeRosa

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Before arriving in Washington, DC participants took part in The Online Preparatory Course led by Co-Director of the Center for Applied Peace Strategies, Dr. Charles Davidson on peace and conflict methodology. This also gave the participants an opportunity to connect with one another and meet the APS organizing team.

This year's APS seminar centered on the nexus of peace and technology. Participants engaged with leading scholars and practitioners through hands-on lectures, exclusive site visits, and curated networking events. Each day concluded with a 'Peace Corner', where they heard from successful peacebuilding initiatives and organizations.

The program culminated in the cohort presenting a comprehensive peacebuilding proposal tailored for South Sudan.



PEACE CORNER PRESENTERS

Magdalena Ries, World Child Forum

Milena Berks and Birgit Kemmerling, Bonn

International Centre for Conflict Studies

Sara Maludin, Human Rights Watch

Mark Bounforte, CEO at Delta AI

Arizza Nocum, Kris for Peace

DAY 1: INTRODUCTION AND PERSONAL COACHING

GUEST SPEAKERS

DR. CHARLES DAVIDSON

Dr. Charles Davidson, founder and President of Innovations in Peacebuilding, bringing over 15 years of professional peacebuilding and research, kicked off the program with introductions and an overview of the program.

COSETTE DIXON

Certified Life Coach and Path Coach, Cosette Dixon, led the cohort through a tailored personality assessment and targeted leadership development exercises. This process set the participants up for success by enhancing their awareness of one another's strengths, weaknesses, and communication styles.



“One of the most impactful experiences in this program was our meeting with Cosette Dickson, which deepened my understanding of personality types and processing styles. This insight has helped me adapt my communication and collaboration approaches depending on who I’m working with.”

- Annabella Di Napoli

DAY 2: PEACE AND TECHNOLOGY



GUEST SPEAKERS

DR. KARINA V. KOROSTELINA

Dr. Karina V. Korostelina shared her work on social identity, reconciliation, and resilience in conflict-affected communities, drawing from global research and decades of experience in the field.

DR. JOHN DEROSA

John DeRosa brings over three decades of distinguished leadership experience across public service, national security, technology, and education. He reflected on his career across national security, technology, and education, emphasizing how emerging tech can support peace and collaboration.

CYNTHIA LUKAS

Cynthia Lukas is a passionate filmmaker, storyteller, and peace advocate whose work focuses on inspiring global understanding and compassion. With a background in producing award-winning documentaries, Cynthia has dedicated her career to highlighting stories of peacebuilding, cultural connection, and human resilience. She highlighted how film and media can be powerful tools for peace.

DAY 3: TECHNOLOGY AND SECURITY

GUEST SPEAKERS

DR. EIRLIANI ABDUL RAHMAN

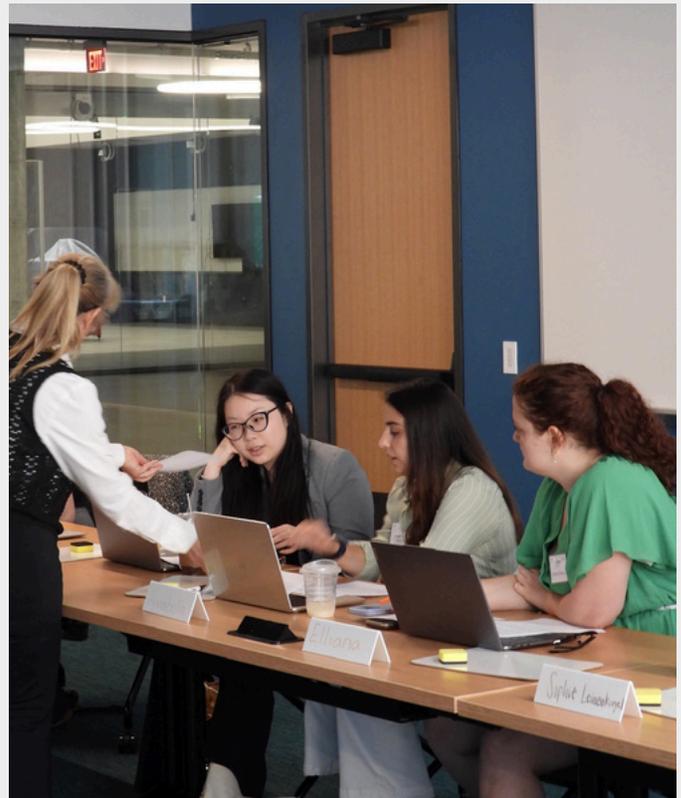
Dr. Eirliani Abdul Rahman, a Senior Fellow at Georgetown University, began day three by discussing her experience on Twitter's Trust and Safety Council, exploring the intersection of technology and security. She shared with participants her resignation from the council, her diplomatic work, and current efforts to combat social media implications and bring awareness to the social and political ramifications.

JOE SCHNIEBS

Joe Schniebs, a cybersecurity expert and chief donor to the Center for Applied Peace Strategies, spoke to the aspiring peacebuilders about the growing importance of data privacy and the importance of building safer and more resilient digital communities.

MEGAN JEANS

Megan Jeans, the Director of Law and Technology at the Center for Applied Peace Strategies gave insight to the participants on the importance of intellectual property law in both the entrepreneurial but also peacebuilding fields.



DAY 4: SCHOLARSHIP & PRACTICE

GUEST SPEAKERS

DR. S. AYSE KADAYIFIC-ORELLANA

Dr. S. Ayse Kadayific-Orellana, an affiliate researcher at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, opened the day with a guest talk on the role of women in conflict resolution.

DR. HARRY ANASTASIOU

Dr. Harry Anastasiou is a Professor of International Peace and Conflict Studies at Portland State University, where he teaches in the Conflict Resolution Graduate Program and International Studies Program. Dr. Harry Anastasiou shared an in-depth analysis of nationalism and post-conflict reconciliation vis-à-vis his decades of work fostering peace in divided societies, including Cyprus.



DELEGATE KAREN KEYS-GAMARRA

Karen Keys-Gamarra, the Delegate for Virginia's 7th House District, discussed with the participants key takeaways from her career in public service. Participants were able to identify key peacebuilding tools and strategies applied in the political field.

“My favorite guest speaker was Dr. Harry Anastasiou, I felt that the specific theories he talked about, especially on how conflict narratives develop and how societies can continue to become more and more polarized and divided, creating this negative feedback loop of harm and distrust and divide, really spoke to me and the things I have seen across the world. I found many of his insights to be applicable. I remember writing down almost every word he said in his entire talk”

– Katerina Henjes

DAY 5: FIELD VISIT

GUEST SPEAKERS

CHRISTOPHER AND SHALON IRONROAD

Christopher Ironroad, President, and Shalon Ironroad, Board Chair of the Wakiya Foundation, joined APS participants to discuss the enduring structural challenges confronting Native American communities, as well as their work towards more just and peaceful communities.

ABBY DAVIDSON

Participants were then hosted at the Aspen Institute by Abby Davidson, who provided a global perspective on entrepreneurship in developing economies, drawing from her years of experience leading international research at the Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs.



DAY 6: PEACE ENGINEERING & FINANCE

GUEST SPEAKERS

JUNE BENJAMIN

June is a peace engineer, human rights attorney, and business consultant specializing in community ESG due diligence and community impact assessments. She explored the role of peace specifications in engineering, as well as conflict-resilient business practices.

THOMAS BISHOP

Thomas Bishop, Senior Climate Finance Advisor at RTI International, added to the peacebuilding dialogue by bringing over a decade of experience in investment and climate finance to the session.

MARGARITA QUIHUIS

Margarita is the CEO of PeaceX Ventures, the first venture studio dedicated to building ESG-native companies from the ground up. She highlighted the impact of ESG-driven innovation and behavioral design.



DAY 7: PROGRAM PLANNING & BUDGETING

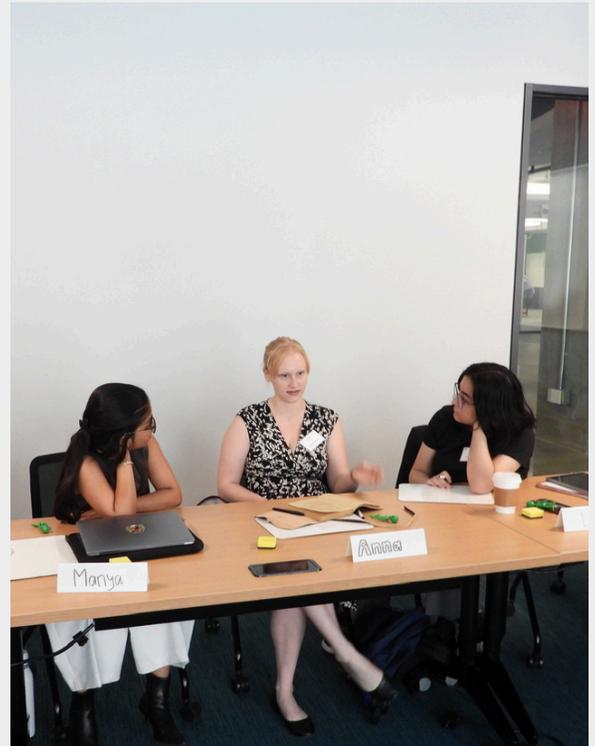
GUEST SPEAKERS

MEGAN JEANS & CAROLINE BLAND

Megan Jeans returned on day seven with Caroline Bland, Project Manager at the Center for Applied Peace Strategies to deliver a presentation to the aspiring peacebuilders on the inner workings of project management. Their presentation shed light on what it takes to sustain a long-term project.

DR. CHARLES DAVIDSON

Dr. Charles Davidson also returned on day seven to discuss the role of money in the peacebuilding sphere. His practical insights helped guide the budgeting portion of the capstone presentation.



“My understanding of peacebuilding has changed in that I have a better understanding of how to go through the process of implementing a project”

– **Anna Oestreich**



DAY 8: SOUTH SUDAN SPECIALISTS

GUEST SPEAKERS

ISAAC K. GANG

Issac K. Gang, Associate Professor of Data Analytics Engineering at George Mason, and a member of the South Sudanese diaspora gave important historical context to the aspiring peacebuilders to better inform their final presentation and prospectus.

DR. SANDRA TOMBE

Sandra Tombe, a professor of International Affairs at the George Washington University, former research program officer at the US Institute of Peace, and board member of Innovations in Peacebuilding, further broadened participants' understanding of the local context of the South Sudanese Conflict. She put her monitoring and evaluation background on display, teaching the aspiring peacebuilders how to conduct M&E and the importance of it in the longevity and sustainability of projects.

DAY 9: PEACE ENGINEERING & FINANCE

ARRIZA NOCUM

Arizza is the Co-founder and president of KRIS for Peace. She is one of ten young leaders selected by UN Secretary-General Kofi-Annan to eradicate violent extremism and promote youth-led peace initiatives. Arriza spoke to the aspiring peacebuilders about her work training youth peacebuilders, shared insights on conducting youth-led research, and its importance in the field of peacebuilding.

SHANNON SPESHOCK, COLLEEN WITHUS, AMADA TAVARES

Shannon Speshock, Colleen Withus, and Amanda Tavares shared their professional journeys and insights into their work at Ridgeline International. Shannon leads brand and marketing strategy, focusing on mission-driven storytelling and communications. Colleen manages technical projects in secure, high-stakes environments, while Amanda supports strategic initiatives through her work in contracts and operations. The participants engaged with them on topics including leadership, innovation, and the intersection of technology and impact.

DR. RAFAEL HANISCH

Dr. Rafael Hanisch, Political Adviser at the German Embassy, offered participants valuable insights into Germany's historical and political landscape. Specializing in U.S. foreign policy with a particular focus on the Middle East, Dr. Hanisch guided a dynamic discussion exploring Germany's peacekeeping initiatives, conflict management strategies, and the current European political climate.



DAYS 10 & 11: PROJECT WORK DAYS

During the final two days of the seminar, participants dedicated their time to refining their project deliverables. They received expert guidance from teams at Innovations in Peacebuilding and the Center for Applied Peacebuilding Strategies, as well as from guest speakers including Dr. John DeRosa and Sandra Tombe.



DAY 12: FINAL PRESENTATION



On the final morning, participants were joined by teams from IP and GMU, along with donors, supporters, and guest speakers, for a joint celebratory breakfast. They then presented their capstone projects to receive feedback, followed by a formal certificate ceremony marking the successful conclusion of the three-week program.

FIELD VISITS

To gain practical insights into the field, participants were invited to a diverse array of institutions, including corporate offices and embassies. These engagements deepened their understanding of the multifaceted nature of peacebuilding efforts.

AMAZON WEB SERVICES

Participants visited the Amazon Web Services Corporate Office in Arlington, Virginia, to learn more about the company's culture of innovation, the link between technology and peacebuilding, as well as professional guidance on their project design.



“Visiting the Aspen Institute expanded my perspective on the business and financial dimensions of peacebuilding, prompting me to think more seriously about creating attainable and sustainable budgets.”

– **Anonymous**

ASPEN NETWORK OF DEVELOPMENT ENTREPRENEURS

The aspiring peacebuilders visited the Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs, in Washington, DC, to learn about the connection between entrepreneurship and peacebuilding. They heard from Abby Davidson, former Director of Research and Impact, and were challenged to pitch a project idea set in this field.

RIDGELINE INTERNATIONAL

Participants visited Ridgeline International, where they met with Shannon Speshock, Amanda Tavares, and Colleen Withus. Among marketing and strategy discussions, the three shared insights into their experiences in the workforce as a woman.



FIELD VISITS

SOUTH SUDANESE EMBASSY

Participants had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity visiting the South Sudanese embassy and speak directly with Mr. Ambassador Santino Fardol W. Dickens.



“Engaging directly with the South Sudanese Ambassador was (...) invaluable as it provided firsthand insight into our country's focus and offered a clearer picture of the realities on the ground.”

- Anonymous



GERMAN EMBASSY

Participants were invited by the German Embassy to learn more about peacebuilding in the context of multilateral diplomacy.

CAPSTONE PRESENTATION

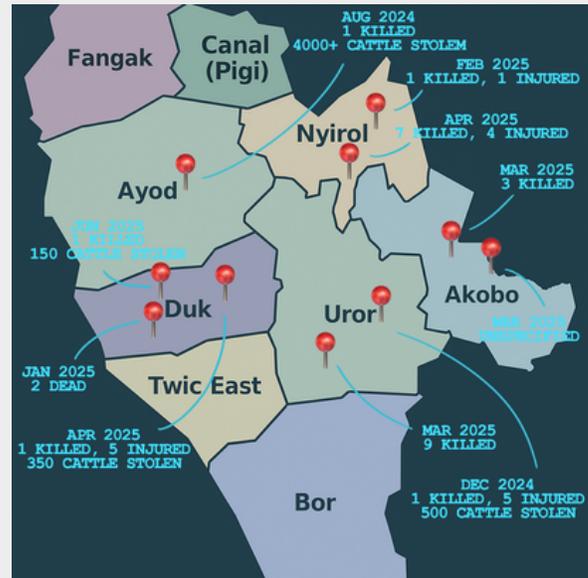
The seminar concluded with a presentation on a peace project designed by the participants. They successfully showcased their knowledge and skills gained from the seminar and presented their approach to address conflict in Jonglei State and the Pibor Administrative Area.



IDENTIFIED KEY PROBLEMS

From April 29, 2025, to May 1, 2025, peace talks were held in Juba, where participants identified four key problems.

1. **Cattle raiding/rustling/theft**
2. **Revenge attacks/killings**
3. **Women/child abductions**
4. **Farmers and cattle keepers' conflicts.**



From Rustling to Rebuilding: A Youth-led Path to Peace in Jonglei State

Aspiring Peacebuilders Seminar 2025 cohort:
*Anabella Di Napoli-Castaneda, Anna Oestreich, Anshra Malik,
Bohan Chen, Clemencia Dane, Elliana Chambers, Katerina Henjes, Leila Afshari,
Manya Gupta, and Sophia Leinenkugel*

June 18, 2025



PROPOSED SOLUTION

On the final day of the program, using the knowledge they gained over the course of the seminar, the ten participants presented a 60-minute presentation to donors, speakers and staff from the Center for Applied Peace Strategies and Innovations in Peacebuilding.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The cohort applied the theoretical frameworks of peacebuilders gained through APS to conduct an in-depth analysis of the inter-communal conflicts in Jonglei State and Pibor Administrative Area using conflict mapping tools. Participants then introduced their pilot program, equipping youth with hands-on skills that are regionally required, such as construction, agro-processing, and motorcycle repair, for no cost. By training with multi-ethnic teams of local journeymen, apprentices can learn to build sustainable livelihoods that reduce economic drivers of violence, such as cattle rustling. Meanwhile, the model also addresses deep-rooted issues like ethnic division and limited access to education.

THEORY OF CHANGE

If ...

At-risk youth (ages 14-18) in Duk County and Uror are trained in applicable vocational skills and peacebuilding techniques by members of conflicting ethnic groups

Then ...

Inter-ethnic conflict, cattle rustling, and abductions will be reduced as a result

Because ...

Trainees will have greater job opportunities, conflict resolution skills, and cross-cultural bonds.

THANK YOU

TO OUR DONORS

None of this would be possible without your unwavering support. We cannot thank you enough for the contributions you made to make this program such a success.

TO OUR TEAM

The dedication and support provided over the three-week program displayed by the entire team at IP and GMU was outstanding and is a testament to our passion for nurturing the next generation of peacebuilders.



TO OUR PARTICIPANTS

Your commitment to learning about the field of peacebuilding is inspiring and affirms our mission. Thank you for your hard work, we cannot wait to see all that you accomplish.