

Incubating Peace

One Earth Future's Approach to Incubating and Scaling Programs for Sustainable Peace

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Sustainable Peace is Possible

The peacebuilding field is increasingly confronting a gap between theory and practice. In principle, we know what sustainable peace looks like and we have a developing understanding of what it takes to get there. In practice, though, the field is still developing models to deliver the kind of complex, sustainable interventions that can address the roots of armed conflict. At One Earth Future, we have developed a standardized operating strategy to help us address this gap by helping us develop in a step-by-step manner systems that we believe are effective and scalable.

One Earth Future (OEF) is an operating foundation with the mission of catalyzing systems to eliminate war. This is certainly a lofty mandate, but we believe that the end goal of sustainable peace is achievable—indeed, has already been achieved in some regions—through appropriate analysis and coordinated work. Our theories of impact are rooted in the recognition that sustainable peace requires addressing multiple aspects of the complex systems driving armed conflict simultaneously and at a scale sufficient to have a real impact on these systems. These solutions have to be both bottom-up and top-down, as well as active across different conflict domains. Achieving this has required us to develop a methodical approach with a long-term-horizon, and one which recognizes that any transformational and long-lasting work towards peace must be contextually informed and applied with the needed scale and scope.

Our strategy is rooted in part in the recognition that we as a single NGO can't solve problems alone and must coordinate with other organizations to support collective impact.¹ At the same time, we develop and execute programs designed to solve specific, discrete drivers of conflict. In executing these programs, we have developed frameworks used for planning, launching, refining, and scaling work that attempts to balance our mission, our limited resources, and our emphasis on working for sustainable and long-term solutions.

This brief introduces our strategy and plans with the goal of sharing strategic learnings. We hope that it will also spur reflection and discussion of our plans and best practices in the field. It explores One Earth Future's thinking in considerable depth, describes our approach to planning, scoping, executing, and closing projects, and is illustrated with some specific examples from our work.

¹ Conor Seyle and Stephanie Thompson, "Networks and Coordination in Peacebuilding" (Broomfield, CO: One Earth Future Foundation), January 13, 2021, <https://oneearthfuture.org/research-analysis/networks-and-coordination-peacebuilding>

The Theoretical Underpinnings of OEF's Strategy

OEF's theory of peace is rooted in the developing consensus among researchers that conflict is always complex and multicausal. While specific inciting events or points of escalation can usually be identified in violent conflict, the root causes are almost always a complicated mixture of social, historical, economic, and political drivers.² These drivers interact with each other, meaning that programs which impact one aspect of the conflict system may easily be overcome by pressures arising from other conflict drivers if there are not parallel programs addressing those as well. They are often large-scale, occurring at the societal level rather than limited to a single community or a single small geography. This poses a challenge to any individual organization interested in promoting peace: how can complexity-informed solutions that work at a scale sufficient for impact be developed?

This overarching challenge has several components. One is complexity and working in a complexity-informed way. This includes both how the specific local dynamics of conflict are understood and how the work is done. Dominant approaches to mapping and comprehending conflict³ tend to emphasize the need to understand complexly interacting causal relationships between different drivers of peace. Mapping conflict understanding should incorporate some way of assessing the relationships between the different drivers. Current thinking tends to emphasize the need for coordination among multiple actors. Rather than having a unified, top-down strategy, OEF's work emphasizes tools for coordination and sharing information that allow individual organizations to make informed decisions about how they can best have a positive effect on the complex systems driving conflict.

A different aspect of the fundamental challenge of peacebuilding is the scale of impact required. Conflict is diffuse. Sub-state violence is often relatively concentrated where violent non-state actors operate, but the support networks and social systems that create the violence are much more expansive. More broadly, the drivers of conflict are often big-picture societal issues of structural exclusion, historical grievance, and the memory of recent violence: things which play out across the societies and subcultures within a state or region.

Based on these issues, then, our fundamental challenge is how to work at a scale sufficient for impact in a complexity-informed way. How can projects be developed at the scale of the problem—an issue that requires significant resources and associated comprehensive administration—while also reflecting the complexity of conflict and the need to operate as part of a larger system? More importantly: what should be scaled?

A bad idea done at scale is significantly worse than no idea at all. It is because of this question that OEF operates as an incubator.

We know that sufficient scale is needed to shift the tides on wicked problems that hold humanity back, yet we also are humble enough to accept that we don't have all the answers in our hands right now for what types of work will shift those tides—no one does. We believe that for impact to be truly effective and long-lasting it has to emerge out of the convergence of global best-practice and local realities. Our approach to incubation is borne of this recognition and of the imperative to develop a systematic approach that can enable the discovery and scaling of effective solutions.

While answering this basic question, we also need to maintain the essential skills that make organizations effective: allowing for learning, continuing to focus on impacts, sustaining organizational adaptation in response to changing environments, and maintaining a do-no-harm orientation.

² One Earth Future, "Architecture of Peace: OEF's Theories of War & Peace" (Broomfield, CO: One Earth Future Foundation, 2020).

³ For example, see CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, "Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) Basics: A Resource Manual" (Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2016).

OEF Program Incubation Process At a Glance >



We analyze a conflict and design a program to foster peace

Program incubation starts with a conflict analysis, mapping out the drivers of conflict, their interrelationships, and current efforts to address them. If we determine that we can make an impact alongside the existing network of actors, we design and validate a program idea with the input of diverse experts, practitioners, and conflict stakeholders. We challenge assumptions, incorporate feedback, and revisit our understanding of the problems. Our programs utilize data, networks, and market incentives to align what exists and create opportunities for sustainable peace, whether at the grassroots or policy level.

We prove a scalable model

If an idea has survived the validation process – through implementation, measurement of results, and iteration – OEF increases our investment and mobilizes a dedicated team. We integrate structured management frameworks and rigorous measurement and evaluation throughout the process so we can remain grounded in reality as we work to create and prove a scalable model.



We systematize the model

When the program team is confident that we have a replicable, adaptable methodology, evidenced by empirical data and documented success, we shift focus to systematizing efficient operational and administrative systems and bolstering factors for sustained impact.

We partner to scale

With evidence of successful impacts toward our goals for peace, we then establish implementation and funding partnerships with organizations that share our passion for effective peacebuilding.

One Earth Future’s partners value the transparency in impact management and measurement that our incubation process enables, and partner with us to scale programs to match the size of the problem they were created to solve.



OEF's Approach to Program Incubation and Implementation

At the heart of our endeavor, OEF is dedicated to discovering that which demonstrably resolves problems that lead to conflict between humans. It is from this imperative that we operationalize programs, from ideation to design and through implementation. To achieve this, we operate within the logic of incubation. This means that we start small and narrow and iterate our way forward progressively as we gain correlating evidence about whether our approach is working. We provide the resources, time, and support needed for new programs to discover what works in a particular context.

Our incubation process consists of two overlapping and interlocking frameworks. The first is focused on the *program*: the organization that is created and assembled to fulfill a mandate of solving a complex problem. **The Program Process** looks at the life cycle of OEF's involvement in a particular conflict context through the design, launch, and eventual scaling of a new program. The second is focused on the *model*: the cohesive and replicable set of projects and activities that the program operationalizes to achieve the desired impact. **The Model Process** deals with the operationalization for impact by the program team itself. Each of these process frameworks serves distinct purposes, but both are used as navigational tools and management references. In the sections below we'll outline the four pillars of the Program Process, zooming into content from the Model Process as it becomes relevant throughout.



Analyzing a Conflict & Designing a Program to Foster Peace

At the Program Process level, we start with a conflict analysis of a particular context, designed to help us understand the dynamics of the conflict and the major underlying drivers. Early in our work, this was primarily done through unstructured interviews and desk research as we explored different program approaches and contexts. Now, we use more systematized approaches that either build new programs from existing programs operating in conflict environments we're deeply familiar with or use modern conflict mapping approaches to generate maps of the drivers of conflict and their interactions.

When OEF first decided to become engaged in the Colombian context, we started to develop an understanding of the conflict dynamics in the shadow of the peace agreement that had just been signed between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government. This was early in OEF's life, when we approached conflict assessment through unstructured engagement with experts. Our expert partners in academia, government, and local NGOs were unified in the perspective that the Colombian Peace Accord represented a major chance to transform the ongoing conflict but that economic, historical, and political issues were going to make the implementation of the accord and lasting peace a significant challenge. Through our engagements we also came to clearly understand the problem of marginalization in rural Colombia in relation to governance and opportunities for economic development. Further, we diagnosed a "last mile problem" when it came to the government extending its support to these populations as well. These partners urged us to develop a program to support the burgeoning peace process and address the underlying factors that could curtail its success.

Ideation

Once we have a basic understanding of the dynamics of a conflict, we identify a singular and specific point of entry: a problem that we can do something about. By beginning with a narrow focus on a specific issue, two things occur. First, we begin to hold ourselves accountable for that specific problem within the larger, overwhelming conflict dynamics. In other words, we start to take seriously, though not literally, the question “What would it take to solve this problem?”

We prefer problem statements over mission statements. While mission statements can serve as a powerful rallying call, they often can become trite and representative of something an organization can claim to be accomplishing every day they exist by doing their work. Problem statements on the other hand offer a very clear and explicit line upon which to base what success is and isn't. Second, we develop targeted strategies designed to impact that specific and narrow problem, acknowledging it will not fully address all conflict-related issues in the context.

In Colombia, our discussions turned towards engagement with actors inside Colombia, including those within government, the opposition, and members of armed groups. Based on these discussions, we identified the reintegration process as being a specific point of entry. We believed (and still believe) that if the reintegration process failed to deliver a better quality of life than the combatants had previously enjoyed—including economic development and improvements in human security—then there would be pressures towards violence. We identified the challenge of ensuring that returning combatants were reintegrated into healthy economic and social engagement as being our point of entry.

Concept Validation

From here, we engage in extensive research on the particular problem and explore preliminary ideas for how an NGO could address it. This includes understanding the stakeholders involved and any previous attempts by other organizations to address the issue. The exploration also involves having the freedom to generate ideas about how collaboration and innovation could help move things forward. Building upon what we learn, we develop a draft model of the program's work and a theory of impact to accompany it. The first version is a basic Framing Document containing the initial outline of what a new program would entail.

We validate the Framing Document in terms of technical and political feasibility and value with academics and experts, those who have attempted similar initiatives, and those who experience the problem directly. As we get critical feedback, we adapt our understanding and proposal. This iterative process may go on for as long as a year, because we are aware of how much we don't know and how consequential incorrect assumptions can be. That being said, we don't shy away from innovation and ideas that may disrupt the status quo. Because of this, some people we engage with are naysayers.

Throughout this validation process we take care to listen deeply for where we may be wrong, but we also dare to envision a different state of affairs. We've started to refer to this organizational state of being as *humble audacity*. We invest in thorough validation up front because we'd rather incur the upfront costs and reduce the potential for failure, the replication of past failures, and resource waste down the road.

During the validation process of OEF's Open Nuclear Network (ONN) program, which uses open-source intelligence to influence decision-making around nuclear weapons risk escalation, we spoke with over 75 experts, government and military officials, fellow NGO workers, academics, and diplomats over the course of eleven months. We developed a theory of intervention backed by open-source intelligence and vetted this general plan with these experts.

Design and Launch

Once we decide that we have met a threshold of feedback saturation (which is admittedly always a somewhat subjective decision), we create a formal proposal in a document called a Program Profile and take it to OEF's Board of Directors, who then decide whether to commit to a long-term investment in the proposed program. If the decision is made to move forward, we recruit and hire an entrepreneurial, knowledgeable expert who takes the reins of program design and launch. We wait to complete the design of the program with the program director at the helm because we want to ensure that they have the opportunity to contribute their knowledge and expertise to the vision, and that they ultimately own it as a new venture.

The ONN vetting process included direct engagement with experts, which helped us to ultimately hire an outstanding duo of leaders for the nascent program: Laura Rockwood, Section Head for Non-Proliferation and Policy in the Office of Legal Affairs of the IAEA where she spent 28 years, and Melissa Hanham, a trailblazing and award-winning researcher in the use of open-source intelligence to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons. Together, we undertook the final design of ONN over the course of three months, and officially launched in January 2020, sixteen months after the inception of OEF's interest in contributing to the field of nuclear weapons risk reduction.

At this point, the overlap with the Model Process becomes pertinent. Here we zoom in on the dynamics at play in the management and guidance of a newly launched program focused on proving a scalable model.



Proving a Scalable Model

Incubation demands a paradoxical *patient urgency*. While we maintain the long-term vision of the program operating at scale, we know that it takes time to not only gain initial indications of success, but to also get a foothold in the context as a brand-new actor in the space. And we've learned that premature pressure and incentives for certain types of outcomes can lead to dysfunction and failure for the program, in terms of both operations and impact.

Integrating Into the Context and Refining the Concept

We build into our planning and expectations that the first year of the program will be invested in three main parallel activities. First, the program team will be integrating themselves into the context. This involves building access to and trust with the relevant stakeholders, as well as gaining technical credibility as needed. Second, through this process of relationship building, they will gain a deeper understanding of the conflict dynamics as they exist at that time and in relation to what they are trying to achieve. This results in a necessary contextualization—a “ground-truthing”—of the theoretical model that was validated in earlier stages. This represents the first concrete challenge for the program: facing the pushback of the context status quo (and those who benefit from it) and having to wisely discern which aspects of the plans need to be flexible and adapted and which need to hold firm. This overlaps with the third activity of building the relevant aspects of the program model, whether those are technical or operational capacities.

When it was first launched, PASO Colombia decided to invest in supporting an ongoing effort to establish a milk processing plant in Buga, a region with a large presence of ex-combatants. By serving as a weaver of partnerships and resources, PASO was able to help move this community project forward in tandem with those involved after it had been stuck for years, and in so doing, gained the trust of ex-combatants and local authorities as an organization that could be relied on. This trust was vital for future success in the implementation of the program’s model.

While Open Nuclear Network’s strategy is primarily focused on delivering information directly into the hands of decision-makers who can do something to reduce escalation, the public-facing reports that were published early on helped build credibility and trust. The legitimacy established by these reports resulted in the team being invited to brief the European Parliament’s Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula on the North Korean conflict context only a year and a half after the program launched.

Robust, Flexible Planning and Tight Feedback Loops on Progress and Failure

Beyond these initial efforts, the incubator supports the program team in their endeavor to actuate the model. Here is where our internal monitoring, evaluation, planning, and learning department, which is optimized to function within the logic of incubation as a “business intelligence unit,” comes into play. We gather data and elicit the nuanced story that accompanies it in order to understand what parts of programs are working well, root out what is not, and provide perspicacious and timely insights that can enable better iteration. We develop the flagging mechanisms to stop ineffectiveness and to “make bad news travel faster” so we can do something about it sooner. And we seek to

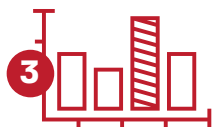
systematically drive shared clarity—which is so often incorrectly assumed to exist—between directors, teams, and executive leadership.

At this point in the process, we are striving for (and, via agreed-upon annual goals, the program is incentivized towards) a progressive evolution towards accomplishment in three realms:

1) stable projects constituting the model, 2) evidence of a causal relationship between the program’s actions and desired outcomes, and 3) repeated intentional achievement of outcomes through implementation of the model.

Once a program meets these criteria, we feel confident that this program is worth scaling, but we know that it is not ready to scale. Experience has taught us that overburdening a program that has found success in “startup” mode, with everyone doing everything it takes to achieve impact and serve stakeholders, can burn out key team players and be disastrous. Therefore, we consciously plan for a period dedicated to reorganizing and building the internal systems that can drive and withstand implementation at scale, all the while testing it’s model of intervention via replication in more instances. Another large dose of patient urgency is needed at this point of incubation.

One of OEF’s earliest programs, Shuraako, was developed with the goal of improving capital availability within the Somali region. The earliest iteration of the program tried to map the investment options available in Somalia and connect them with global investors, but struggled to find traction. Many investors were skeptical of the potential returns from within Somalia, and our team, which was then based in the US, lacked deep roots within Somali communities. We recognized that this model was fundamentally ineffective and iterated towards a program that started with principal-related investments from our funders being directly managed by OEF through staff based in the Somali region. Further the program developed a context-informed due diligence process that enabled it to find credit-worthy entrepreneurs left behind by the current financing environment. That approach demonstrated its effectiveness very early, through a quickly increased rate of placement for funds, extremely high repayment rates for the loans, and reported satisfaction from funding recipients. We realized that the basic model was sound, and the program entered a reflection period where we discussed different potential ways of scaling.



Systematizing the Model

We work to systematize the implementation of the program’s work, improving the structure of the organization and roles so that it runs more smoothly and efficiently. Systematizing also includes creating better internal processes and systems, and implementing practical tools such as information management systems. We know at this point that true scaling is a process of meticulous subtraction, not addition. We want to boil the model down to its essentials, and in such a way that its fundamental impact can be operationalized at a significantly larger scale.

We also conduct workshops to outline the factors that are necessary to ensure long-term sustainability of the impact that has already been achieved and then incorporate these into our work. For peacebuilding programs that work with local communities, sustainability means furthering empowerment through robust locally owned governance structures, improved livelihoods, and strong partnerships. For our peacemaking programs that work at the policy and diplomacy levels, thinking about the long-term impact means influencing institutional resource allocation and norm or policy change. We are intent on avoiding the trap of starting to scale and finding that our initial instances of success begin to crumble without the previous level of support.

We also know that to operate at scale, a program cannot continue to have the same level of investment in each instance where the model is applied, or it risks becoming infeasible due to linear growth in resource demand making it financially unviable.

As an incubator, what we look for here as indicators that the program is prepared to scale—to *really* scale—are three things: 1) An increase in efficiency of program operations (e.g., lower cost per output, shorter time for model implementation); 2) Sustained impact, defined in terms of continued model impact over time with reduced program investment; and 3) Initial success in external fundraising and partnership leveraging.

When a program meets these criteria, we feel confident that it is ready for scaling, and then efforts are ramped up in that direction.

When our PASO Colombia program had been operating for several years, we had year-to-year data on a number of indicators that had been collected by our internal learning and accountability team. These indicators showed that participants in PASO's projects felt supported and much more satisfied with the demobilization and reintegration process than participants in some other programs for reintegration run by other actors. This data attracted the attention of the Colombian government and external actors, and PASO was asked to develop its work by opening three times as many new reintegration projects as the program had been running. Achieving this scaling required PASO to standardize its programming and administration and make both more replicable. PASO restructured its entire organizational chart, moving from a structure emphasizing a collective "startup," all-hands-on-deck mentality and flexible roles to one that allowed more specialization in different aspects of its work. Along the way, the program team also developed a standardized model for establishing and managing the ERAs (rural alternative schools in the native Spanish), the program's flagship project. This included codifying the day-to-day engagement with communities and training contractors to do the work previously done by more senior, full-time PASO staff. In executing this restructuring and standardization, the partnership between PASO as a program and OEF as a central organization was important: OEF could offer the needed operational support and the assistance to help PASO tighten its programming while allowing PASO's specific expertise to drive the outcomes.



Partnering to Scale

We look for partners who can replicate or extend the reach of the model until it works at scale. We understand that this by itself won't lead to peace, but it's likely to contribute in important ways. This scaling can be in terms of either size or scope. Size is relatively straightforward and includes increasing our activities and reach. Scope, on the other hand, can take several forms. Some scope change happens organically, as we grow up and down the causal pathway that links our entry area to violent conflict. It also occurs through finding areas of overlap with funders at scale, which not only enables us to continue to implement our core model, but also broadens the range of opportunities to contribute to different stakeholders. Though this is part of the way forward, care is required in choosing who to partner with or receive funds from.

Above, we discussed how our PASO program positioned itself to grow in scale. Through partnerships with the Colombian government and other actors, the initial success of PASO was ramped up into a replicable model and rolled out at scale. This process of partnership-building inevitably also led to growth in scope. The data from community surveys led PASO to realize that the drivers of conflict that it was addressing were simultaneously being affected by other issues. PASO also realized that its model was addressing human security issues that were not accounted for in our initial theory of impact. Further, as PASO deepened its presence in rural Colombia, the team realized that the social and economic challenges faced by ex-combatants undergoing reincorporation were almost identical to those being experienced by members of the receiving community. This recognition opened the door to partnerships with organizations interested in issues other than just reincorporation—organizations interested in broader concerns about human security, social stability, and rural economic development. PASO formed partnerships with organizations including UN entities and Live Aid to help scale its work, thus reaching more individuals and impacting more issue areas.

The Shuraako program is another example of growth in scale and scope. As the initial idea was validated, the initial proof-of-concept funding committed by our founding funders demonstrated that it was possible to do loan-based development in Somalia in ways that contributed to sustainable local economies. This evidence led to the realization among important investors and aid organizations that this model was feasible and solved a problem that had eluded prior attempts. Eventually, with partnerships with Norfund, Oxfam, and Sida, Shuraako scaled the model in Somalia, raising and placing millions of dollars in Somali small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Further, as a result of these partnerships Shuraako's scope of impact grew to include the provision of specialized technical assistance to SMEs with the launch of the first-of-its-kind Somali Credit Guarantee project, which provides credit guarantees as incentives for Somali financial institutions to increase their support of local credit-seeking SMEs.

Conclusion

OEF knows firsthand that building peace is hard. Peacebuilding is, by its nature, complex, and it's difficult for any single organization, especially an NGO, to play a determinative role. Solving problems at the root of armed conflict requires a complex web of interventions across multiple different issue areas and across all levels of society. Because we take seriously our mission to eliminate armed conflict, OEF develops tools that let us facilitate this web of interventions while also showing direct, material impact on specific problems.

The intervention model we have developed is one approach to operationalizing this. We are an organization committed to learning, and as part of that, we recognize that our models will not work perfectly or indefinitely and will need to be updated. However, we believe that this is a valuable tool for building peace sustainably, and we hope that it is valuable to other peacebuilders encountering these questions.