

Newsletter

Better Evidence Project



Better Evidence Project Staff – April 2023

Table of Contents

Message from the
Executive Director
Research Assistant
Team Highlight
Research to Practice
with Dianne Rambo
Bridging Research
and Practice
Peace Week Re-Cap
Get Involved

Our Mission:

The mission of the Better Evidence Project (BEP) is to contribute to stopping and preventing wars by promoting and facilitating the use of evidence to guide the support, design, implementation and assessment of peacemaking initiatives.



Better Evidence Project

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter
School for Peace and Conflict
Resolution

Message from BEP's Leadership

Executive Director: Dr. Jeff Helsing

The Better Evidence Project very recently hosted a fascinating discussion that focused on how peace and security in Africa can best be understood and strengthened by local research and an understanding of local conditions. You can read about this session, which took place during the Carter School's Spring Peace Week at the end of March, in more detail on page 10 below. What struck me most about this session was the important conclusion that the peacebuilding community focuses primarily and at times exclusively on large-scale violence while too often ignoring the day-to-day effects of ongoing insecurity that results from systemic violence, climate change, economic uncertainties, and injustices and inequities. The three presentations reflect the importance of understanding how locals assess peace.

The Better Evidence Project team has been actively engaged on a number of additional initiatives. You can read about the Bridging Insights grant-funded project on page 8. In addition, the Better Evidence Project is contributing to a new project funded by the Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau at the State Department that focuses on the impact of the use of intergroup contact in democracy, human rights and governance programs. The Better Evidence will focus in particular on the development and dissemination of evidence-based tools on contact theory and provide recommendations for practitioners to utilize new evidence on contact theory in their work.

Earlier this month, I also had an opportunity to participate in the launch of the Principles for Peace Covenant, a new frame of reference and common compass for building lasting and legitimate peace.

This covenant, which bridges theory and practice, promotes the value of evidence, practice and lived experience, and brings together a coalition of 120 organizations from among diplomatic, security, peacebuilding, and mediation actors.



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Supported by various states, this new initiative seeks to empower actors to create durable and inclusive peace processes that achieve long-term peace outcomes.

Along with this Peacemaking Covenant is the establishment of the Principles of Peace Foundation which will be the implementation and follow-on mechanism to help realize the goals of the Covenant. More information can be found here:

<https://principlesforpeace.org/peacemaking-covenant/>

In discussing the Better Evidence Project with a number of participants who came from around the world, it was clear that an effective, participatory and inclusive approach to peacemaking must stand on a strong foundation in evidence.

To that end, we are entering the final month in development of the Better Evidence Project Resource Center. We now have a team of 8 students who are actively cultivating new resources every week for the Center and the entire Better Evidence Project team is curating these sources. This includes the writing of an abstract for each and tagging and coding each source so that users can easily find and access them. Our prototype is just about finished and when complete it will then go through a review process. We are excited to launch the Resource Center by the end of the spring. So please look for our announcement.

And, with the launch of the Resource Center, we will move to the development of a resource and evidence hub with the goal of promoting relevant and cutting-edge data, cases, research, and analysis in order to serve and connect the wider peacebuilding community.

Best regards,

Jeff Helsing



Owais Yousef

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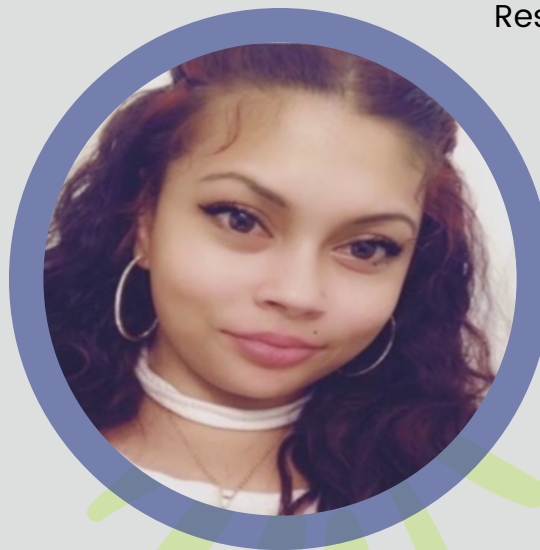


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Research to Practice

Interview with: Research Assistant, Dianne Rambo

Dianne Rambo is a Research Assistant for the Better Evidence Project and a contemporary student pursuing a GMU Bachelor of Individualized Study (BIS) degree. She returned to school to become a peace practitioner after a successful career as a federal contractor in the field of national security.

Dianne's other areas of concentration include peacemaking through forgiveness and reconciliation, including through the lens of genocide. She is a member of the Carter School's Working Group on Forgiveness and Reconciliation (WGFR). Dianne joined the Better Evidence Project in Fall 2022 and has since gone on a study abroad trip to Rwanda focused on reconciliation with GMU Professor Al Fiertes. We interviewed Dianne to hear about what she experienced in Rwanda and how she experienced both the evidence and action sides of their work.

What interested you in working with the Better Evidence Project?

I am a contemporary student who recently returned to school to complete my bachelor's degree, to transition my prior 20-year career built by happenstance to building an intentional new career that is my life's calling of healing trauma. When I learned about the Better Evidence Project from fellow classmate, Naomi Davis in our Praxis of Forgiveness and Reconciliation course, I thought this sounded like a great opportunity to pursue exploring my future career working in the field of Peacebuilding. I resonated with BEP's mission and joined the team in Fall of 2022.

What interested you in the Rwanda Study Abroad Program?

Since I was a young child, I have always wanted to travel the world. I have done some international travel as a tourist to countries in Europe and one in Central America, but I had yet had an opportunity to travel to Africa. When Dr. Al Fuertes mentioned he was leading this study abroad in the summer of 2022 on the last day of a trauma seminar course I was taking, I felt a little ping in my heart that said I must go! The more I learned about the academic work planned for this trip and the idea of meeting peacemakers who have had successes in this arena, I had to meet them. This felt like another piece of the puzzle I needed to experience as part of my life's calling.

What was a highlight of the trip?

The highlight of my trip was meeting the peacemaker practitioners leading the efforts in Rwanda and creating my global network of future colleagues. The peacebuilding efforts they have done and are doing in their country have helped their country heal from the grassroots to the national level. I am delighted to stay in contact with them and help them spread the message of their good work.

I was in awe of experiencing the everyday life of the local people. They reflected the positive evidence of the country's efforts to implement sustaining national peacemaking policies. I felt safe anywhere in the country we traveled. Not only that, but Rwandans were also a very welcoming people anywhere we went. They are proud of their country and where they are today.

Another highlight of the trip was meeting the members of the Light Group. They are a grassroots organization who have successfully reconciled former perpetrators of the genocide with their victims.

Research to Practice

Interview with: Research Assistant, Dianne Rambo _____

Research to Practice

Interview with: Research Assistant, Dianne Rambo

In working with practitioners did you see the application of evidence? Did you see the need for better evidence to support practice?

Yes, I witnessed several areas of the application of evidence. They have taken cultural practices that worked pre-colonization and reimplemented them, based on evidence that it had worked in the past. They have used the long-standing justice process of Gacaca courts to offer transitional justice to formerly armed combatants. As I mentioned previously, The Light Group has offered victim-offender conferencing for those involved in genocidal harms at the grassroots level. When I was there, I mostly saw how effective their peace interventions were and how useful this evidence could be in other contexts.

How do you see your experience in Rwanda impacting your work as a research assistant?

I envision bringing to light the evidential experience I had in Rwanda back to the BEP and for the Capstone project for my Bachelor of Integrative Studies Degree. I plan to leverage my network of Rwanda practitioners to assist in highlighting their evidence in the US as I am building relevant research in support of peacebuilding. I hope to assist BEP in sharing their evidence with our global community. A lot of the practitioners are doing great work, but it may not be especially highlighted to us in the West. They leaned on cultural practices to heal harms and I wonder what we can identify in the US as cultural solutions to our systemic harms.

Bridging Research and Practice: “Why It Worked: A Comparative Study of Select Resolved Conflicts Since 1946.”

At the end of April, 5 teams of researchers from different academic institutions (the Ottawa Dialogue Project at the University of Ottawa; the Department of Peace and Conflict Resolution at Uppsala University; the Negotiation Task Force at Harvard University's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies; the Department of Geography and Spatial Sciences at the University of Delaware; and the Carter School) will conclude a comparative study of specific violent political conflicts that were asymmetric, protracted, and ethnonational and that resulted in peace agreements. This interdisciplinary project aims to connect new research and analysis to peacemaking efforts in conflict-affected societies. The focus is on how, through case study research and analysis, factors such as identity and religion, land and resources, power and leadership, and the design and implementation of a peace process have

contributed to the successful resolution of a conflict or the negotiated outcome to a conflict. The research teams have drawn lessons that may be relevant for other protracted, ethnonational and asymmetric conflicts and the prevention of violence from reemerging after a peace agreement. As a comparative and interdisciplinary project, the discussion will focus on key findings as well as lessons learned and key recommendations for the future.

The Better Evidence Project has been the coordinator of the Carter School contribution which focuses on identity and religion. Professor Karina Korostelina has overseen the identity components of the project and Professor Marc Gopin has overseen the religion component. Dean Alpaslan Özerdem has provided much of the comparative analysis framework based on his pioneering work on comparative peace processes.



Bridging Research and Practice: “Why It Worked: A Comparative Study of Select Resolved Conflicts Since 1946.”

This project, devised and funded by Bridging Insights, a nonprofit organization, is an example of creating evidence derived from an interdisciplinary research-based model for conflict resolution that can apply to other conflicts. There were four focus areas in which the conflicts were studied:

1. Process and Negotiation: how do parties in conflict build a sustainable peace? (covered by two of the teams);
2. Power and Leadership: how do parties in conflict relate to, lead, and engage with others?
3. Land and Resources: how do parties in conflict relate to their natural environment?
4. Identity and Religion (this is the focus of the Carter School's work): how do parties in conflict see themselves and one another?

The goal is to re-think past conflict cases with an eye toward extracting lessons for use in current conflicts. We have prepared research and analysis in ways that will be useful to practitioners faced with similar challenges in their own communities and countries. What was also unique about the project was that these research teams shared much of their analysis with each other and, more importantly, regularly received feedback and questions from practitioners who are the intended audience for these cases. The release of the report will be announced within the next two months.



Peace Week Re-Cap

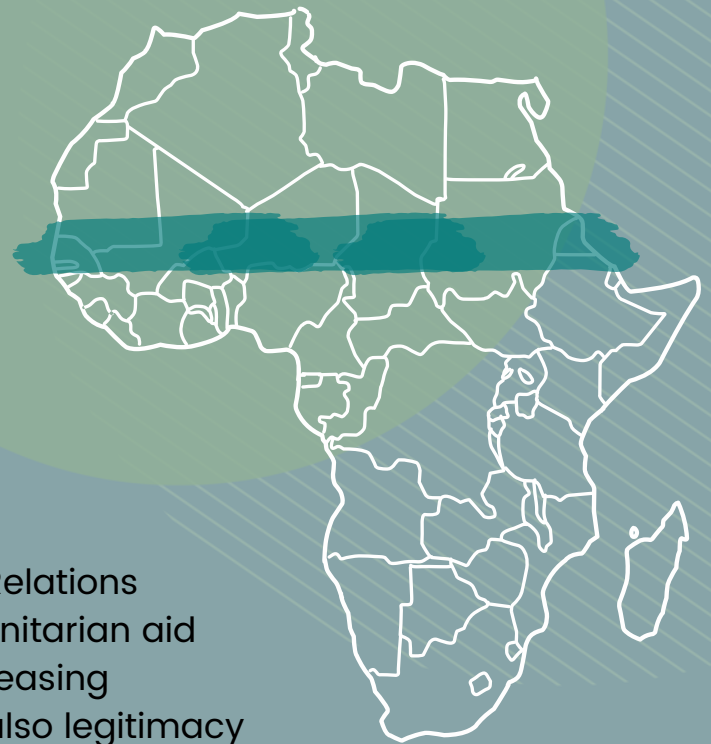
Research to Evidence to Practice: A Learning Cycle

In our morning peace week session on “Research to Evidence to Practice: A Learning Cycle,” presenters Mathieu Bere, Beza Tesfaye, Patrick Vinck and Phuong Pham shared insights about locally-led peacebuilding efforts in Africa. They offered perspectives that focused on the impact of conflict and insecurity on local communities while also drawing lessons from local peacemakers.

Mathieu Bere, a consultant in international peacebuilding and conflict resolution, Sahel expert, and interim manager of the Carter School’s Transforming the Mind for Peace Lab, began the presentations with his research in the Sahel region of Africa. His methodology prioritizes evidence-based knowledge from local actors. Despite the challenges of widespread poverty, the negative impact of climate change, and a rapidly growing population that is outpacing available resources, Bere discovered through local interviews and informal conversations with key informants that there are communities that are outliers in the region’s growth of violent extremism. In Amataltal-Agadez, Niger and Dori, Burkina Faso, evidence points to contextualized responses to insecurity and local leadership as the key factors that have led to very low instances of extremism and terrorist recruitment in those towns.

Beza Tesfaye, the Director of Research and Learning for Migration and Climate Change at Mercy Corps, and Senior Associate, Project on Fragility and Mobility, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, continued the conversation about the Sahel region. Focusing specifically on the effects of climate change, Tesfaye’s research proposes policy changes to address risks in the region.

On behalf of the Council on Foreign Relations Tesfaye conducted research with a humanitarian aid lens, finding that conflict is a result of increasing socioeconomic vulnerabilities. There are also legitimacy issues with political leaders in the region. Climate change will manifest in the form of high temperatures and



Peace Week Re-Cap

Research to Evidence to Practice: A Learning Cycle

increased rainfall that will impact health, livelihood, and security. She concluded that there is an absence of climate adaptation, exacerbating existing issues. In response to these findings, she recommends policy that reframes the security crises in the Sahel to a human security crisis that emphasizes socioeconomic vulnerabilities. She recommends a closing of the financial gap, an investment in adaptation measures, and strengthening of local systems and local peacebuilding.

Patrick Vinck and Phuong Pham with the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Harvard Medical School picked up on this reframing of security to discuss conflict research in Central Africa. Their study used survey data, interviews and focus groups to show how local communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic localize and contextualize the meanings of peace. They found a disconnect in many large INGO's reports on security and the local sense of security. Local people were concerned with more than the presence of militia groups. Robberies and assault also impacted their feelings and perceptions of security. Overall, indicators of peace as perceived by local people and NGO's varied significantly from international organizations with their top-down approach. They recommended a much more substantial role for local leadership in monitoring and evaluation, sustainable skill development and resources, and research that leads to policy change.

Ziad Al Achkar, PhD Candidate, Carter School, and Research Associate, Better Evidence Project, drew connections between the three presentations, highlighting how significant it is to allow complexities of local contexts to guide conflict analysis and intervention. Al Achkar shared that using our connections and resources on the international level to support local actors is our challenge. In responding to whether security should be seen as a through line between conflict issues, or if dynamics such as climate change should be viewed independently; The presenters agreed that security is a core need and should be addressed within each of the conflict dynamics because human security and wellbeing are both impacted by and impacts all conflict dynamics.

Written By: Naomi Davis

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