

# Guide to Communicating the Importance of Peacebuilding

*What it is and Why it Matters*

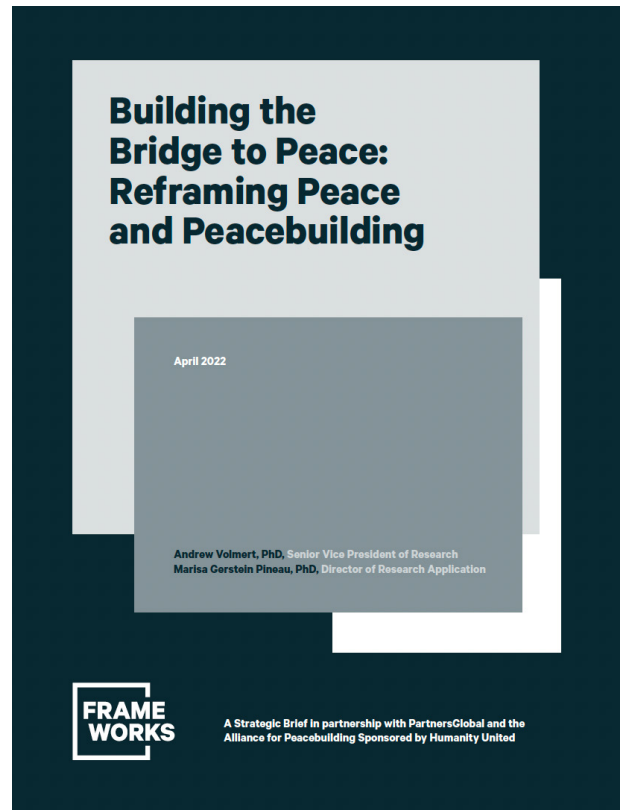


Alliance for  
Peacebuilding

**Alliance for Peacebuilding**  
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# Introduction

The peacebuilding field struggles to explain what peacebuilding is and why it matters. This inability to communicate effectively keeps peacebuilding as a second-order priority behind other development sectors, resulting in a lack of adequate funding, strong policies and laws that center peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and weak public constituencies. A recently published analysis by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows that peacebuilding accounted for just **9.6% of official development assistance (ODA)** in 2021—a 15-year record low, wherein the U.S. contributed its smallest volume of ODA toward peace in nearly 20 years. Even when laws and policies integrate and center conflict prevention peacebuilding, such as the **Global Fragility Act (GFA)** and the **Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Act**, they are underfunded, delayed, and deprioritized, resulting in lagging implementation. Reforming peacebuilding narratives is vital given the current **30-year high** in global violent conflict and fragility—in faraway places and neighborhoods just down the street. The **Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP)**, in partnership with the **FrameWorks Institute**, conducted multi-method **research** on how **evidence-based narrative approaches** can effectively make the case for peacebuilding. This guide, using the examples of the GFA and WPS Act, outlines strategic, evidence-based narrative and framing approaches for U.S. policy and lawmakers to reframe their advocacy and communication. By applying these reframing narratives, advocacy within the government and the public will be more successful at effectively making the case for what peacebuilding is and why it must be centered, integrated, and robustly resourced in strategies, policies, and laws.



AfP's peacebuilding narrative research, conducted in partnership with the FrameWorks Institute and PartnersGlobal

## The Research Findings

The first phase of the research identified common mindsets Americans bring to any peacebuilding discussion, which presented several challenges for communicators. For instance, Americans mainly thought of peace in passive terms as the absence of conflict, but some had a more productive understanding of peace as something actively built by creating its necessary conditions. Americans assumed military action is central to security, but recognized the importance of diplomacy and somewhat valued community-level relationship building and addressing economic inequality. Respondents widely saw conflict as an inevitable product of human nature (making peace unattainable), but also sometimes saw peace as an achievable choice to work toward. They also embraced American exceptionalism but conceded that when the U.S. imposes its will on the world, it

does not always turn out well. Finally, beyond valuing diplomacy, Americans had little understanding of what peacebuilding work involves.

To address these challenges, the research found effective peacebuilding and conflict prevention framing strategies must emphasize *interconnectedness* by showing how events in one part of the world affect us all—in faraway places and in neighborhoods just down the street. For example, Russia's termination of the Black Sea Grain Initiative led to increased global food prices, resulting in massive food shortages in conflict-affected and fragile states and heftier grocery bills across America.

The research also found the importance of providing *active and practical examples*, such as the use of bridge-building metaphors, to show peacebuilding is tangible, hard work, and ongoing. For example, DT Global's USAID-funded Shejeh Salam program supported grassroots peace dialogue in PIERI, South Sudan to effectively prevent violence. The region had faced violent conflict driven by cattle raiding, revenge killings, and child abduction. The dialogue brought together 53 delegates including women, youth, traditional leaders, faith groups, traders, and diverse

ethnic groups to explore mechanisms for ending this problem. The delegates identified the building of roads, fishing supplies for cattle camp youth, the establishment of common markets, and support for women's income-generating activities as key enablers of livelihoods and primary means of reducing intercommunal conflict and food insecurity. The dialogue successfully returned 60 abductees. It also charged local chiefs with ensuring that perpetrators of violence and cattle raiding are tried through traditional courts and that stolen cattle are traced and returned to their rightful owners.

Social science research also finds crisis messaging triggers the fight-or-flight center of the brain, causing people to try to preserve their security "often to the exclusion of empathy and openness to others." Crisis messaging focuses heavily on fear in response to urgent problems without presenting a solution, such as UN Secretary-General António Guterres's July 2023 statement that "climate change is here. It is terrifying. And it is just the beginning." Rather than drive people to action, this messaging leads to news avoidance and unproductive dismay, effectively causing people's brains to shut down.

## Building Good Narratives: Examples

Since 2001, the U.S. military has intervened internationally over and over under the auspices of the "War on Terror." Using the military to address violent conflict has exacerbated sectarian tensions and led to widespread violence. Instead, we must use the proven tools of peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding programs are designed to end hostilities and restore peace. When violent conflict erupts, peacebuilders stop the violence by bringing together the parties to resolve conflict without violence. Once the conflict is resolved, peacebuilding programs re-establish safety and stability.

The pandemic has underlined just how *interconnected* the world is—what affects one part of the world *affects all of us*. When we allow violent conflict to happen anywhere, it can *spread and disrupt peace everywhere*. As a global community, peacebuilding matters to all of us.

Peacebuilding programs work to create *sustained* peace in countries and communities around the world. These programs engage in *ongoing efforts* to address the root causes of violent conflict. By *building and maintaining* the conditions for peace, peacebuilders work to ensure *continuing* safety and stability.



AfP and Mercy Corps co-lead the GFA Coalition—a non-partisan coalition of more than 100 organizations that work closely with Congress and the Administration to ensure successful implementation of the GFA.

## The GFA and WPS Act

The GFA and the WPS Act are **game-changing laws** that seek to center and prioritize conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The GFA mandates 10-year, prevention-oriented U.S. Government diplomacy, assistance, and security strategies in four priority countries and one region: Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, Haiti, Libya, and Coastal West Africa. While the GFA marks an **important shift** in addressing the global challenge of violent conflict by prioritizing conflict prevention, it must be resourced and prioritized.

The bipartisan **WPS Act** seeks to operationalize the landmark **UN Security Council Resolution 1325** and **subsequent resolutions** that form the global WPS Agenda, to ensure women’s meaningful leadership in peace, security, and political processes. The WPS Act has transformative potential as a powerful tool that can help the U.S. reduce and prevent violent conflict and build sustainable peace. Global violent conflict is at an all-time high, affecting over **two billion people**. Furthermore, violent conflict **disproportionately impacts women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals**. However, **evidence** shows women’s inclusion in political processes is critical to building sustainable peace and **the security of women and girls determines the security of states**. The WPS Act has made

important progress in integrating gender across the U.S. interagency, but it has yet to lead with conflict and atrocity prevention.

By applying the following reframing narrative recommendations, we can build more robust support both within the government and with the public to effectively make the case for what peacebuilding is and why it must be centered, integrated, and robustly resourced in strategies, policies, and laws.



USAID Deputy Administrator Isobel Coleman at the launch of the 2023 U.S. Strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). Photo: USAID

# Recommendations

## 1. Use the value of interconnectedness to build support for robust GFA and WPS implementation.

The world is interconnected; when violent conflict happens anywhere, it can spread and disrupt peace and security everywhere. The U.S. Government should use this argument in its justification for ensuring the successful implementation of the GFA, including necessary resources by Congress. The selection of Coastal West Africa as a GFA priority demonstrates its importance given its proximity to the Sahel, one of the world's [fastest-growing humanitarian crises](#) and a [hotbed of violent extremism](#). In Coastal West Africa, the GFA can create a model of effective, integrated regional coordination around diplomacy, development, and security assistance that strengthens democracy and addresses the drivers of violent extremism. Support for this model can connect to broader regional stability in the Sahel and inform regional approaches in other fragile parts of the world. These efforts can also reduce vast refugee influxes from the Sahel to Europe that are causing [instability and undermining social cohesion](#) in European countries. For instance, refugees from Burkina Faso and Mali are the [top nationalities among sea arrivals to Italy](#). Ultimately, these efforts can avoid expensive humanitarian and security crisis responses and save taxpayer money.

This argument also applies to WPS Act implementation. The treatment of women in a society is a [key indicator](#) of its peacefulness and stability; 11 of the least gender-equal countries are conflict-affected and fragile states. Gender equality promotes peace. In Northern Ireland, women were [crucial in negotiating](#) the 1998 [Good Friday Agreement](#) that ended "The Troubles," including by serving as trusted brokers and working across political, religious, and cultural differences. During the peace process in Colombia that culminated in the [2016 peace agreement](#), women [mediated local ceasefires](#), ensured the agreement addressed primary grievances such as [land restitution](#), and [built public support for the agreement](#). In the Northern Triangle, [gender-based violence is one of the most significant but overlooked drivers of migration to the U.S.](#) Addressing gender-based violence in the region is [crucial to stemming massive flows of potentially destabilizing refugees to the U.S.](#) The U.S. Government should emphasize the [connections between the treatment of women and state security](#) to show how resourcing and implementing the WPS Act can build sustainable peace that benefits everyone.

## 2. Use specific, digestible examples to give a concrete understanding of how these laws are vital to prevent and reduce violent conflict, violence, and fragility and build sustainable peace

Using specific, digestible examples of peacebuilding interventions can strip away abstract, confusing, and jargon-laced terminology and make the peacebuilding principles of these laws relevant to Members of Congress and their constituencies. Examples should be simple: what is the problem, and how did you solve it in an actionable and practical way? The research also found that examples should focus on initiatives and programs, rather than individual heroes.



Somali Youth Learners Initiative Teacher Training. Photo: USAID/Somalia

Focusing on programs instead of individual heroes attributes the success of peacebuilding interventions to solutions that anyone can be a part of, instead of attributing success to the unique, outstanding qualities of one particular person in one particular context.

For instance, Mercy Corps' [Somali-Youth Learners' Initiative](#) (SYLI) aimed to promote education and civic engagement for frustrated youth in Somalia who are often recruited into armed opposition and violent extremist groups, driven by lack of opportunities and exclusion. The program helped youth gain access to secondary school and invited students to participate in civic engagement opportunities, ultimately reducing support for violence by 65% among program participants compared to non-participants. By focusing on step-by-step explanations of how actions produced positive outcomes, people gain a better understanding of what peacebuilding is and why it matters. This framing highlights that success does not come from exceptional individuals, but instead from community leaders and organizations.

The GFA priority countries and regions are conflict-affected and fragile, so progress may not be linear or fast. However, the U.S. Government should highlight practical successful examples to ensure sustained support for the GFA throughout its 10-year timeline. Highlights could include programs like the [Male Behavior Change Program in Papua New Guinea](#), which addresses the significant problem of [more than two-thirds of women](#) having experienced physical or sexual violence in the country. The program facilitates conversations with men and boys to discuss toxic masculinity, women's rights, and healthy relationships to break cycles of gender-based violence. Coastal West Africa highlights could include programs that improve government responsiveness, such as strengthening [Local Peace Councils in Ghana](#), which contribute significantly to building peace through mediation, early warning, and peace education.

The U.S. Government should also spotlight diplomatic and policy impacts to Congress, including instances of bilateral and multilateral engagement. The GFA is enhancing bilateral partnerships, including with [Germany](#), which is closely working with the U.S. government in Coastal West Africa.

Concerning the WPS Act, the U.S. Government should focus on cases that explain how programs are leading to the prevention or reduction of conflict. A good example that can serve as a template: out of the 877 disputes resolved across the USAID WPS activities in six states in Nigeria, women mediators newly trained by USAID resolved 116 disputes, none of which recurred. However, much of the [2022 WPS Congressional Report](#) lists a series of program outputs like the number of women trained in mediation or peacebuilding programs, without showing how those outputs actually contributed to conflict prevention and sustainable peace.

### 3. Use **bridge-building metaphors** that show peacebuilding is hard work and building peace requires ongoing maintenance

AfP’s peace framing and narrative research found that bridge-building metaphors are particularly powerful in increasing understanding of and support for peacebuilding. Building a bridge is not a “one-and-done” job—it is hard work that requires ongoing maintenance. Bridges require careful planning, design, and upkeep over time, but when invested in, they can provide ongoing value for the entire community. Similarly, implementation of prevention-oriented legislation like the GFA and WPS Act will take time, attention, and support and require constant cooperation among Congress, the Administration, key implementing agencies, host countries, the private sector, and civil society to successfully prevent and reduce violent conflict and build sustainable peace. It is critical to use bridge-building metaphors to increase public and Congressional support—such as “durable structures,” “cooperation from both sides,” “bridging divides,” “ongoing cooperation,” and “partners on equal footing”—and not use wonky language to describe building peace. For examples of practical and actionable programs, see AfP’s [#PeaceBuildings collection](#).

In November 2022, the head of USAID’s Conflict Prevention and Stabilization Bureau Rob Jenkins exemplified a bridge-building peacebuilding metaphor when he [testified to Congress](#) on GFA implementa-



tion in Coastal West Africa. He stated “peacebuilding is not simply the absence of violence or war; it is the constant need to build, cultivate, and sustain the foundations of a peaceful society throughout a country whether it’s in the middle of a crisis, slipping into one, or emerging from one. What we do as donors and interveners matters on the ground; this unity of purpose demonstrates for other African countries, donors, and partners how we can maintain peace together.” As it discusses GFA and WPS implementation, the U.S. Government should continue to deploy these types of metaphors when discussing peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

#### 4. Avoid leading with crisis messaging, and instead lead with solutions

Crisis messaging overwhelms audiences, leaving them unmotivated and tuned out. To avoid shutting down people’s brains, the U.S. Government should lead with solutions and successes around the GFA and WPS Act. Avoiding starting with crisis messaging does not mean failing to mention or analyze the problem, but the U.S. government must lead with solutions to keep people motivated before outlining problems for peace and security.

Most discussions on WPS implementation unfortunately lead with the fact that women and girls face the worst impacts of violent conflict. These narratives portray women and girls as victims in need of protection rather than vital components of building sustainable peace. For instance, a recent [press release](#) by the UN opened with “more than 600 million women and girls lived in conflict-affected countries in 2022, a 50% increase since 2017.”

The U.S. Government should instead lead with narratives that women and girls are agents for peace, and therefore part of the solution to the global violent conflict problem. When violent conflicts flare, for example, the U.S. Government should show how women peacebuilders are working on the [frontlines of humanitarian response and community peace processes](#). On GFA implementation, the U.S. Government should constantly emphasize the law could be [revolutionary to U.S. foreign policy and assistance](#) and an unprecedented solution to global

Women FARC ex-combatants in San Jose de Leon, Colombia, are leading economic projects like cacao fields to sustain their families and contribute to the entire community, as they reintegrate into civilian life. [UN Women/Pedro Pio]





violent conflict. Specifically, the U.S. Government should focus on how the GFA is making the interagency more coordinated, evidence-based, flexible, and preventing violent conflict.

## 5. Make the case for **peacebuilding as a priority**

AfP's research found that discussing funding for peacebuilding in the context of cuts to military spending can trigger deeply engrained partisan reactions in the U.S. and, therefore, stifle advocacy. The public and policy and lawmakers should not advocate for resourcing the GFA, WPS Act, and other conflict prevention programs and policies by redirecting money from military spending. Rather, they should make the standalone case for funding peacebuilding. Peacebuilding makes foreign assistance effective because it analyzes the drivers of violent conflict and fragility and what works and does not work to reduce and prevent violent conflict, violence, and fragility and build sustainable peace.

Standalone arguments can buttress support for GFA and WPS Act implementation. Despite many efforts to counter violent extremism in the region, the Sahel, neighboring Coastal West Africa, accounts for **43% of global terrorism deaths**. Furthermore, the economic impact of violence in the region in 2022 was **\$174.5 billion**. GFA implementation in Coastal West Africa can help prevent these devastating economic impacts from spreading from the Sahel and address the real drivers of violent extremism, such as corruption and poor economic conditions. The same argument can be applied to the WPS Act—women's participation in peace processes **increases** the probability of the agreement lasting at least two years by 20% and lasting 15 years by 35%, and successful implementation of these agreements will avoid devastating impacts in conflict-affected and fragile states.

The U.S. Government should also emphasize that peacebuilding is **cost-effective** because it prevents the recurrence of economically disastrous conflicts. Conflict prevention can also **develop smarter U.S. foreign policy** that promotes economic growth, democracy, and partnership between the U.S. and fragile or at-risk states. The frame of interconnectedness can help message this point—preventing conflict overseas saves taxpayer dollars at home.

AfP at Advocacy Day, 2019





## Alliance for Peacebuilding

Named the “number one influencer and change agent” among peacebuilding institutions worldwide—AfP is a nonprofit and nonpartisan network of 200+ organizations working in 181 countries to prevent conflict, reduce violence, improve lives, and build sustainable peace. At our core, AfP cultivates a network to strengthen and advance the peacebuilding field, enabling peacebuilding organizations to achieve greater impact—tackling issues too large for any one organization to address alone.

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#### **Alliance for Peacebuilding**

1800 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Suite 401  
Washington, DC 20036 USA  
[www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org](http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org)

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For additional information, please reach out to:

**Nick Zuroski**, Manager, Policy and Advocacy  
[nick@allianceforpeacebuilding.org](mailto:nick@allianceforpeacebuilding.org)