
Cohort Zero: How Humanity United “walked alongside” young leaders to find a new path toward peace

By Anne Starr (EL 2014)

Case
Study

Context: A fragile peace

After eight years of doing directive, often crisis-driven work with government and civil society leaders in an African country, the eruption of yet another civil war led Humanity United (HU) to reassess its approach to building sustainable peace.¹ As the country divided across ethnic and geographic lines, HU witnessed its former partners being drawn into the very behavior that had worsened conditions on the ground. Ethnic groups turned on each other, and the country descended into a seven-year war that saw atrocities perpetrated on civilians, 400,000 dead from fighting and conflict-exacerbated disease and starvation, massive internal displacement, and the making of a significant diaspora as people who could, fled the country. The recent announcement of a coalition government between former rivals signaled the possibility of a fragile peace. Yet fear, suspicion and mistrust of necessity remained as a traumatized people cautiously tested the boundaries of their new reality.

Humanity United was forced to admit the shortcomings of its former efforts, which followed the customary top-down, short-term NGO approach, done in 1-3 year grant cycles. HU staff saw that ethnic violence and civil strife reaching back fifty years would not be answered in short initiatives – that these sometimes produced the opposite of their intended results. One person in-country observed: “Many times I have seen that peace-building initiatives are seen as short term projects, and that’s it. Sometimes more harm is done and relationships are even broken by the time something is ‘completed.’” They recognized they could not possibly know the complexity on the ground as well as in-country people did and wanted the people whose lives were being affected to have the freedom and flexibility to find

their own solutions to peacebuilding at this critical time in their country.

HU staff wanted to break new ground; to challenge their assumptions and learn a new way of operating that would yield better results. And that meant questioning the ingrained power dynamics that foundations historically take for granted. In a country where 50% of the population is 18 or younger, HU saw potential in working with a younger population already hungry for a future of their own making while still being keenly aware of the legacy of old divisions. HU staff chose to recast their role to one of “accompaniment,” where they could “walk alongside” and support, challenge and co-create with their partners on the ground to help them reach their own goals. Despite their best intentions, this would prove easier said than done and would need to be tested at every step by both HU and the people they worked with.

Humanity United saw the clarity, commitment, and passion young people had for their better future and recognized this as a powerful entry point and compass that could guide their work together. In 2016 they began to explore what it would look like to make investments in these young leaders and, by extension, the future generation of leadership in the country. They conceived a pilot aimed to identify and engage cohorts young people with the capacity, commitment and vision to resist the old dynamics, mitigate recurring cycles of violence and polarization, and become a force for positive change in their generation. HU staff asked themselves what it would take to invest in a more sustained way in order to support this younger generation as they worked toward a country *they* wanted to see: A country where people could move anywhere with freedom from suspicion and violence.

¹ Humanity United is a foundation dedicated to cultivating the conditions for enduring freedom and peace. It supports and builds efforts to transform the systems that contribute to human exploitation and violent conflict. HU was founded by The Omidyar Group, a diverse collection of independent organizations and initiatives that pursue different ways to improve the lives of people and societies.

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Humanity United teamed with three different organizations to form a nine-person implementing partnership to accompany their in-country young leaders as the work got underway (referred to as the implementing team). Unyoke Foundation introduced the accompaniment approach by facilitating ongoing reflective conversations that modeled constructive dialog while respecting the universally held experience of trauma; Search for Common Ground fostered a deeply relational rhythm of learning, adaptation and responsiveness; and Hivemind brought behavioral science and network weaving concepts to inform the propagation of the work. HU staff learned from their partners how to accompany, enabling it to redefine the role of donors toward co-learning and co-creation in peacebuilding and the broader field of philanthropy. Based on learning from other initiatives that used a cohort model, selection began for an initial group of 12-15 people to form the first cohort.

Cohort 1 was formed in March of 2017 as Humanity United began its two-year pilot program to test how a ten-year approach might work. The team identified a diverse group of 13 “restless” young people (7 women and 6 men) from varying vocations and invited them to a series of retreats called “Unyokes” (created by Unyoke Foundation) where they could “unyoke” from their daily stresses and challenges to share their own story, the story of how their country came to be in its present state, and reimagine a future for their country that they wanted to work towards together. The implementation team wanted to see if it was possible to foster spaces for diverse, creative, and committed young people to build deep, resilient relationships across polarized social boundaries, and if those relationships could begin to strengthen the social fabric of an emerging generation of positive leadership in the country. They posited that cohorts of young “movers” could work together and use the power of their respective networks to expand the number of people committed to pushing back

against the conditions that were fueling the civil war. They saw an opportunity to support these cohort members to develop the capacity to carry themselves across all their interactions with other people in a way that could skillfully challenge the thinking and behaviors that perpetuate division. They also believed the cohort members could serve as a model to others for what was possible. Together, these ideas formed the hypothesis HU staff wanted to test in their pilot.

For their own learning, Humanity United wanted to clarify what would need to be true for it to commit to this 10-year engagement. At the heart of this approach was a commitment to local leadership and ownership of the work. They wanted to co-create a strategy and process that allowed them to walk alongside the in-country cohorts, providing the tools and resources that would help them to achieve their long-term goal. They saw their role as reinforcing the sufficiency, capacity and agency that already existed within these young leaders. Each of the organizations represented on the implementing team was also seeking to learn how to reframe the role of international actors, and to push forward new models of working together and alongside local peacebuilders.

Leading Humanity United’s part in the initiative, Jesse Eaves (EL 2018) and Zoe Newcomb were sensitive to the need for a more adaptive approach to working with this group of young people in complex, fast-changing and dangerous conditions. They saw Emergent Learning (EL) principles and tools as fit for this purpose in that they preserved the flexibility and autonomy so important to the cohorts’ work on the ground, especially during those times when members of the implementing team were not in the country. Jesse and Zoe believed EL practices could help cohort members experiment together and learn from their collective experiences to get to their goal from any number of different directions.

Supporting cohorts of young leaders as they reached across ethnic boundaries

In the initial series of Unyoke retreats, as the members of Cohort 1 listened to each other, they heard themselves telling the same story: they all suffered the effects of the war and they all shared similar goals, difficulties and joys. Contrary to rhetoric from the country’s leaders, not one of them had gained from whatever political or ethnic affiliation they happened to be under. In this important initial time together, these young people learned to trust themselves and one another enough to engage openly. They came to recognize the person next to them as their brother or sister where previously they saw only the “enemy.” Former child soldiers formed friendships they would have considered unthinkable in the past. They imagined a future reality where enough of these connections could break long-held stereotypes and begin to create a unified body of all ethnic groups.

Holding the vision of their country as a place where people could move anywhere with freedom from suspicion and violence, in November of 2017, four Cohort 1 members conceived the idea of gatherings where diverse groups of people could come together over tea and talk about what mattered to them, how they could address concerns, and the future they wanted to see. Their use of tea was strategic — drinking tea was seen as an essential part of forming deeper community bonds. They named their idea Take Tea Together (TTT). They saw themselves modeling a way of being that showed understanding and respect for people across geographic, ethnic and gender lines.



The TTT idea caught on. From their first, small meeting of just themselves, they soon attracted hundreds of attendees who would gather beneath “Peace Trees” in a highly social, inclusive and celebratory atmosphere. Members of the community started donating tea and sugar and cups so that more people could come and take part. Their early public gatherings included breakout sessions where people could meet in smaller, more intimate groups to consider general questions: “What’s going on in your community and how is it impacting you?” With each event they became more purposeful and focused: “How is tribalism impacting you? What can you do to address it?”

Another team within Cohort 1 devoted itself to bringing community, respect and inclusion to the post-war country’s many amputees. They began wheelchair basketball games, challenging the stereotype of limitation and replacing it with one of resourcefulness and different ability. They created community and dialog in a 120+-person network of passionate individuals and inaugurated country-wide consciousness-raising radio programs. They saw their work as an essential part of the journey of ensuring inclusion as they worked to restore peace. A third team within Cohort 1 focused on community dances. The TTT and community dance teams collaborated to create a combined event. Dancers from a displaced persons camp came out of the camp for the first time in six years and performed their culture’s signature dance. The event was a spectacular success, widely praised in the media for the healing it showed was possible.

The selection of Cohort 2 was greatly influenced by Cohort 1. While most of the selection criteria for Cohort 2 was the same, this time around Unyoke Foundation explicitly focused on interviewing and selecting people who either lived outside the capital or had strong links to the rural communities where they came from.

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When Cohort 2 began in July 2018, they got their bearings by helping Cohort 1. They learned to keep their approaches simple and take advantage of local culture. They observed that just showing up together pushed back against the political master narrative that no one from a group outside your own could be trusted. More geographically dispersed than Cohort 1, Cohort 2 focused on the radical act of visiting each other in their communities across the country, sometimes between regions that had been historical enemies. As they visited one another’s villages, they witnessed how a whole community would stop and look and be amazed to see young people defying the narrative that everyone had been told.

What started as a one-off trip to help a fellow cohort member pull off a basketball tournament between youth became a series of trips where there wasn’t even a pretense of an activity to bring them together. They just went and visited with communities, modeling what cooperative behavior could look like in their country. One Cohort 2 member, in talking about how tribalism was ripping the country apart, said, “We are 64 children from 1 mother.” “641M” named their higher vision – to be identified by what was held in common first and not by perceived differences between the 64 ethnic groups – and became their tag line. The name was quickly picked up by members of both Cohorts. One Cohort 2 member described his experience: “According to what is believed in my community, I am not supposed to visit this city. But with 641M, I had the courage and the confidence, the safety and the security – the trust in my brother... who lives there. So we went there.” Cohort 2 members began considering how they could weave together initiatives that touched agriculture, sports for peace programs and women’s empowerment in their broader geographic reach.

All of this success and growth did not come without challenges and things to learn. As the TTT idea grew, Cohort 1 team members realized they needed to develop skill in hosting difficult conversations where people felt safe speaking openly about recent traumatizing experiences. They needed to create the conditions where their fellow citizens could meet the stereotyped “other,” and see that the ethnic lines their leaders kept talking about were false – that they all suffered similarly. As the work of the Cohorts grew, they also experienced very practical problems: They realized that they needed to remember the sound systems that had worked so well last time and that committing it to memory was unreliable. They learned that rather than holding a dance competition pitting tribal dancers against one another, showcasing and celebrating dance forms from different ethnic groups was more in keeping with their intention to bring the ethnic groups together in mutual respect and appreciation. Seventy-five volunteers asked to actively participate in planning the events and taking the work forward. This was an early signal that the implementing team’s hypothesis that the work could spread organically through activating existing networks might prove correct. But it also created the need for the cohorts to model and mentor new-comers so the same spirit and intent was preserved in their events.

A Cohort 1 member reflected that conflict invariably arose between team members and that the relationships between members of the Cohort were as important as the relationships they sought to restore in their communities. They practiced the same behaviors with one another as they strived to demonstrate between themselves and their countrymen. They called themselves peacebuilders and peace ambassadors. What started out as small TTT gatherings were soon attracting 2,000+ people. As others experienced the vibrancy of these events, they too became interested in the idea and the cohorts began imagining taking it not only throughout their own country, but beyond their national boundaries.

Walking alongside: Learning what it takes to co-create the conditions for success

As this work and learning was happening in-country, the implementing team was trying to keep up and learn as well. Early efforts to walk alongside Cohort 1 were riddled with misunderstandings, misreading of one another’s intent, and false starts. For example, the implementing team at first thought the tea idea was too simple. But what *they* thought mattered less than giving these young leaders the opportunity to form their own experiments. Meanwhile, said Jesse, “Zoe and I wanted to make sure Cohort 1 did not feel like a Humanity United ‘science experiment,’ so we chose not to share our own learning agenda with the cohort.” But that turned out to just confuse their in-country colleagues. Jesse and Zoe began to ask themselves how they could get Cohort 1 to embrace Emergent Learning as a way to learn together while maintaining the agency of their young leaders to do what they felt would make the greatest difference. But they quickly realized they couldn’t *make* others do anything – that this actually, and rather ironically, ran counter to their intent to grow that agency.

Though HU staff and the rest of the implementation team aspired to “co-create” the conditions for their partner’s success, all of these experiences pointed out the inconsistencies in

their own thinking and blind spots where their behaviors as the funder did not yet live up to their intention to create the space for the cohorts to take ownership and experiment.

During a lively debate about how to better engage the in-country Cohort members as they did their work, Pedro Portela of the Hivemind Institute pointed out that the kind of deep conversation the team was having was exactly the kind of interaction they wanted to see in-country. “We have Cohort 1. We will soon have a Cohort 2. We are like a Cohort Zero (Cohort 0). We need to model the very things we say need to happen in-country for deeper relationships to form and impactful work to take place. It all starts with us. We need to do the work ourselves first.” With that, Cohort 0 was born with the intent to model the very same behavior and ask and answer the very same questions they said they expected their partners to ask.

They, Cohort 0, saw that no one person or organization had all the answers. Cohort 0 needed to make clear to their partners on the ground that they also were figuring it out as they went along. They needed to explicitly “level the playing field” so that members of all cohorts, including themselves, felt they were equal partners in learning. It also meant that they, too, needed to redefine partnership to reflect the same values and expectations their in-country colleagues held – of relationship building, deep listening, diversity, care for self, and interpersonal accompaniment.

Cohort 0: “It all starts with us. We need to do the work ourselves first.”

The newly named Cohort 0 saw that they had failed to convey how important learning was to the whole initiative, the pilot and the 10-year goal. “Learning” means different things to different people. Cohort 0 had not made the connection to their in-country cohorts between learning about their own hypotheses and Humanity United’s capacity to assess whether their day-to-day actions were helping in-country cohorts to break through the deep polarization in the country or not. Without repeatedly making this explicit, the people on the ground could not understand why it was so important to do “learning,” in a project that was only just beginning.

For example, Jesse and Zoe early on experienced frustration when they felt Cohort 1 was not reflecting on their experience in a substantive way, nor asking themselves how it influenced what they needed to do next. There appeared to be an “action gap” between one action and the next — taking lessons from their

experience forward to getting it right the next time. Some of this could be attributed to differences in culture. Where written reporting and use of technology was the norm for Cohort 0 in reflecting on their work, it was not natural to Cohort 1 and their early written reports about gatherings seemed vague and tentative.

Cohort 0 decided to ask for video storytelling, thinking that this more natural medium might elicit deeper meaning-making and gain better traction. In response, a Cohort 1 member shared a story about how they were reaching out to an ethnic group often accused of cattle raiding that no one had been in contact with before. Another Cohort 1 member reported on how they started using music to share their message of peaceful coexistence. What started as a lyric shared via audio to the cohorts on WhatsApp became a song that was recorded and played on multiple radio stations throughout the country. Cohorts 0 and 1 also began to practice Outcome Harvesting, where the Cohorts identified results achieved through their work and then worked backwards, questioning one another to learn exactly how they reached that outcome and what they could carry forward to apply to their next opportunity.

Cohort 0 was encouraged by these learning experiments and continued to try different ways to strengthen learning. At a certain point, however, the in-country cohorts started to experience all of these experiments as random “chaos” and asked: “When will Cohort 0 actually have a strategy?” Cohort 0 learned that timing and transparency were critical elements – communication channels needed to be totally open as Cohort 0 experimented and adjusted in order to not get out ahead and once again unintentionally appear to be directing the effort. When Cohort 0 admitted they didn’t know the answers but would work with Cohorts 1 and 2 to find them together, the cohorts became excited about learning in a way they hadn’t displayed before. An unofficial motto for Cohort 0 became “give the facts” - meaning tell the cohorts in-country what was happening and let them decide what to do next.

As Cohort 0 began to practice this “walking alongside” approach, and were able to successfully demonstrate that they, too, were learning and adjusting, they noticed Cohorts 1 and 2 starting to capture what they were learning in a more deliberate way for the first time. Over time, they saw more detailed descriptions of what actually happened, more nuanced reflections on what it meant for subsequent actions and more specificity about when those actions would occur.

Facing a whole new challenge together

Toward the end of the two-year pilot, attention began to shift from reacting to urgent messes that needed immediate attention to accompanying their partners in an expanding and deepening cycle of learning. With this shift, HU staff realized they were finally co-creating and co-learning with the in-country cohorts.

Humanity United knew the power dynamic between themselves as a funder and in-country cohorts had changed when they started to hear, “Oh, Cohort 0 needs to do better in these ways.” In a recent trip, they were directly confronted every day with their shortcomings. At first they were surprised; that kind of pushback never happens in traditional NGO-style relationships and would

have seemed inconceivable at the outset. But they were pleased that a space had opened for them to receive direct critical feedback that attested to the humility, curiosity and mutual respect that had grown between all cohorts.

As they saw these changes unfold, HU staff started to feel confident of their concept and ready for the second phase of work. The naming of Cohort 0 helped Jesse and Zoe realize their vision of learning as something everyone could partner in, accelerating the cycle of learning for everyone. The use of the name “Cohort 0” helped the implementing team expand their concept of “us” to include all cohort members – and their work got much better. Cohorts 1 and 2 began to see themselves as equal and autonomous, rather than as groups awaiting direction, and this increased their agency even further.

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As one in-country cohort member said at a convening with all the cohorts, “There is no more Humanity United, no more Search, no more Hivemind, no more Unyoke. You are just a Cohort like us.” Another described the accompaniment approach as being like construction scaffolding: “It is temporary in nature. The scaffold does not build the house. It is vital to help the work but it supports the engineers and builders doing the real work.” He then continued, “In the work of peacebuilding we need to be flexible. International practitioners need to be flexible so we can find the solutions that work for us...We have the ownership of our ideas and activities. No one tells us how to do this. We believe we know better than outside experts.”

Jesse, Zoe and the rest of Cohort 0 now recognize that the true focus of their work involved a fundamental restructuring of their relationship as a funder and as outsiders to these cohorts. Together, they were trying a new way to find peace. Once Cohort 0 became fully transparent about how they and the in-country cohorts were both experimenting together as equals, it gave everyone involved the freedom to try new things openly in an ongoing cycle of feedback and adaptation, to discover what worked in their environment. “The learning happened in small steps,” said Jesse, “and yet it was transformational.”

Everything changed when COVID-19 hit the country. But the agency and ownership and adaptability that the cohorts had practiced over the past 2.5 years set the stage for a whole new round of experiments. The goodwill Cohorts 1 and 2 have built up across communities enables them to go out and try to push back against misinformation about the disease. They used the network of radio hosts and community leaders they created to reach and influence people to understand the dangers of the disease and some of the practices like hand washing and social distancing that help contain it. Parts of the TTT experience were able to migrate to the radio which, throughout the country, is largely a call-in format. But everyone involved recognized that dialog over the air waves is different from being together in person. The work between Cohort 0 and Cohorts 1 and 2 has always been deeply relational, relying on multiple in-person gatherings, as was all the work of the in-country Cohorts on the ground. As the crisis deepened and individuals dealt with how COVID was affecting them, their families and their country, everything needed to be reconsidered in light of the uncertainties ahead.

Enabling the agency and constant experimentation among these young leaders led to outcomes HU staff could not have envisioned at the outset. Jesse and Zoe are confident that these young leaders will continue to adapt and evolve to this new reality in ways that no one could have designed from the outside, and in ways that will continue to create new pathways to peace well beyond the 10 years of Humanity United’s investment.

*We thank the members of Cohorts 0, 1, and 2 for allowing us to share the story of their journey. --
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