



DT Institute

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# 2024

## DT Institute Annual Report





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## A message from our CEO

It’s clear we’re living through a pivotal moment for DT Institute and our ecosystem of funders and implementors focused on building democratic societies globally. The events of the past several months underscore the importance of our mission, and I write with deep gratitude for our partners, funders, and team members who made this year a success.

As we closed 2024, DT Institute entered a new chapter. I stepped into the CEO role and we welcomed Abbie Castiglione as our Chief of Staff and Director of Private Donor Development. This transition came at a time of tectonic global shifts in the industry, and DT Institute has responded with resiliency.

Our exceptional team skillfully implemented programs in Sudan, Syria, Iran, and Yemen, and delivered real impact in fragile environments. Highlights from 2024:

Our team responded quickly to the emerging opportunity offered by the fall of the Assad regime, opening new opportunities for engagement. Our programs enabled access to reliable, uncensored information and secured private channels of communication to protect civil liberties. We documented illicit funding networks that fuel violence to inform policy makers and help civil society preserve a pathway to a peaceful transition. We laid the groundwork for the future of transitional justice programs, ensuring that these efforts hold perpetrators accountable and don’t come at a cost to innocent civilians.

Our Grants & Research Programs, funded by the GPD Charitable Trust and other philanthropic partners, were restructured in 2024. With Violet Tsagka leading during a key transition period, we oriented our portfolio to reflect sustainable funding partners capable of catalytic change including Humanity United, Carter Center, Rotary International, and the Carter School at George Mason University.

We created a partnership with an emerging family philanthropy, Trisphera, to co-implement a unique program that enabled the Karen people of Myanmar to collaborate safely using internet freedom capabilities that we’ve used in other domains. With this successful pilot program, we look to expand our work building futures free of the fear of autocracy.

I was personally proud to help generate a \$750,000 gift to CSCMO from my West Point classmates in the Class of 1989, which we conveyed during our reunion in October.

As we look forward, I’m excited to work with Abbie who comes to DT Institute from a history-making journey building one of the most impactful non-profits in the United States, the University of Chicago Crime and Education Lab. Her experience, and her natural energy and drive, along with my commitment, network, and focused energy, provide DT Institute with a leadership team that I am confident will realize my personal vision for our philanthropic undertakings.

Thanks for being part of the DT Institute community, and we look forward to another great year.



**John DeBlasio**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



# A message from our Chief of Staff

As this report goes to print, the retreat of traditional foreign aid has left critical gaps across the globe at a time when democracy is under serious threat. While the full impact of this shift has yet to be seen, our mission has never been more important.

DT Institute exists to support, facilitate, and amplify local leaders and their efforts to build resilient democratic societies. Having survived the massive shifts to foreign assistance, we are using our unique position as both a funder and implementer to work alongside our partners to tackle some of the toughest challenges facing democracy today.

In 2024, we joined two new funder collaboratives—one with Humanity United, Packard Foundation, and Ford Foundation, and another with The Carter Center. By pooling our funds, we have accelerated our collective impact. In response to the rapid decline of U.S. foreign aid, these partnerships enabled us to deploy over \$300,000 in rapid-response funding to organizations around the world.

Since joining DT Institute in January, I’ve been honored to work alongside John and our remarkable team to help shape the Institute’s future. In my first six months, I’ve had the privilege of learning from colleagues, partners, and the funding communities through a wide-ranging listening and learning tour. These conversations reaffirmed the values that make DT Institute distinct: our catalytic philanthropic support, our investment in locally led solutions, and our nimble operating model that adapts quickly in moments of uncertainty.

As we look ahead to the rest of 2025, we are refreshing our strategy and refining our purpose to meet this critical moment. We honor the work that brought us here and remain focused on the future—adapting to new global realities, innovating to fill the gaps, and scaling what works through evidence and collaboration.

Thank you for being part of this journey.



**Abbie Castiglione**  
CHIEF OF STAFF







# About DT Institute

We are a nonprofit committed to “doing development differently” by acting as both a private funder and implementer of programs that defend democratic values. We are dedicated to putting power, resources, and trust in the hands of local leaders.

Grounded in innovation, collaboration, and radical transparency, our mission is to stand beside those who risk the most to defend democratic values, acting as partners to co-create, rather than dictate, to facilitate change. Our work is not just about delivering results; it’s about reshaping the way development is done to ensure it is more inclusive, more adaptive, and ultimately more effective.

Using our subject matter expertise, we implement innovative global development programs that address the root causes of conflict, defend human rights, and expand civic space. Through our values-aligned philanthropic investment, we channel funding to grassroots leaders, movements, and innovators often overlooked by traditional philanthropy. We put resources directly into the hands of those closest to the challenges, reflecting our unwavering belief that lasting development must be locally led, boldly supported, and globally reinforced.

## Our Numbers

### IMPLEMENTATION

**\$6.4 M**  
in funding for

**90+**  
organizations in

**8**  
countries

### IMPACT GRANTS

**\$1.6 M**  
in support to

**20+**  
organizations in

**14**  
countries through

**11**  
grants

## Our Values



### Ethics

We aim to demonstrate responsibility, integrity, fairness, and respect in all that we do.



### Innovation

We continually pursue new and better methods, find efficiencies, and seek ways to increase our peace and development impact.



### Collaboration

We develop and facilitate long-term partnerships based on mutual trust and respect.



### Radical Transparency

As thought leaders, we commit to sharing our insights with the broader community of experts (within legal, ethical, and regulatory boundaries) to advance peace and development.



# Implementation Highlights from 2024

Globally, authoritarian regimes and anti-democratic actors are rapidly deepening their control by minimizing civic spaces, weaponizing disinformation, sowing distrust in democratic institutions, and violating fundamental human rights. For the first time in over 20 years, the world has fewer democracies (88) than autocracies (91) with nearly 3 out of every 4 people in the world, around 72%, now living in autocracies—the highest percentage since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> As trends in democratic backsliding increase, there is an urgent demand for a proactive response to strengthen the ability of local actors to resist repression, rebuild civic trust, and drive democratic resilience from the ground up.

DT Institute is responding to this critical moment by equipping communities with the tools, expertise, and flexible funding that they need to create innovative solutions to entrenched problems. Through a targeted portfolio of programs spanning Media Technology, Peacebuilding, and Human Rights, we work with civil society organizations (CSOs), governmental institutions, human rights defenders, and citizens who are on the front lines of the fight for enduring peace and democracy. The DT Institute approach prioritizes locally owned solutions that are adaptive, sustainable, and capable of creating long-term, transformative change.

In 2024, our efforts took on heightened significance against the backdrop of violent conflicts in Ukraine and Sudan, closing civic space in Serbia and Yemen, and continued repression of ethnic minorities and women in places like Iran and Myanmar. We trained young people to become peace ambassadors in volatile environments, assisted communities in resolving local conflicts through inclusive dialogues, and defended press freedom while combating disinformation.

At DT Institute, we are not just implementing programs, we are doing development differently. In the face of massive global issues, we reject one-size-fits-all solutions in favor of approaches that are locally led and grounded in deep contextual understanding. Our projects empower communities to unite to resist oppression and intimidation, reflecting our commitment to positive change that is developed by the community. We stand alongside those who risk the most to defend democratic values, acting as facilitators and partners of change.

<sup>1</sup> Lührmann, A., Marquardt, K. L., Morgan, R., & Lindberg, S. I. (2025). Democracy Report 2025: Defiance in the face of autocratization. V-Dem Institute. [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr\\_\\_2025\\_lowres\\_v2.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr__2025_lowres_v2.pdf)

## Human Rights

In regions gripped by conflict, human rights violations are not just isolated incidents, but rather daily realities that destabilize communities, destroy lives, and perpetuate cycles of violence and fear. DT Institute confronts these injustices by strengthening the legal and social frameworks that protect human dignity. In 2024, we worked with local

communities to report and counter human rights violations, empower individuals with knowledge of their rights, and stand beside victims in their pursuit of justice. By reinforcing accountability and amplifying the voices of the most vulnerable, we help transform fragile environments into foundations for peace, resilience, and change.





## Advancing Awareness of Human Rights Violations Against Children

In 2024, the Supporting Awareness, Facilitating Enforcement of Children’s Rights in the Yemeni Conflict (SAFE) project entered its second phase (SAFE II) led by the INSAF Center for Rights and Development (INSAF) and the Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations in Yemen (YCMHRV). SAFE II aims to consolidate efforts to protect Yemeni children from grave human rights violations during the ongoing conflict by promoting local and international recognition and facilitating accountability for perpetrators of these abuses.

Over the past year, SAFE II expanded collaboration with national government entities and child rights advocacy organizations to strengthen coordination, improve access to vulnerable populations, including internally displaced children, and support joint efforts in awareness-raising, documentation, and advocacy. In collaboration with local authorities, YCMHRV and INSAF secured approvals from the Ministry of Human Rights, the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations of Human Rights, and the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission to conduct activities in camps for internally displaced persons. SAFE II held its first awareness session in these camps, educating children, caregivers, and others

responsible for children’s wellbeing about child rights and human rights violations.

SAFE II also influenced national policy to reintegrate children who are victims of human rights violations. Several ministries, including the Ministry of Legal Affairs and Human Rights, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, signed a protocol that established procedures for handling children formerly recruited by Ansar Allah (Houthis) forces, with a focus on their safe reintegration into families and communities.

Through broader public outreach, SAFE II reached over 250,000 people with compelling stories illustrating the risks to children recruited by armed groups. INSAF launched social media campaigns featuring testimonials from families and people impacted by human rights violations, and YCMHRV published coverage in Asharq Al-Awsat, broadening public engagement beyond traditional policy actors. The network of organizations and institutions forged through SAFE II is especially impactful in Yemen’s fractured and resource-strained environment, where coordinated, cross-sector action is essential to protect children and promote sustainable accountability.



Attendees at the first SAFE II awareness sessions reported **better understanding of child rights by 89% compared to a pre-session baseline.**

## Strengthening Civic Engagement and Political Dialogue in Syria

For most of 2024, Syria’s protracted conflict deeply fractured its political, social, and institutional fabric. Amid persistent insecurity, economic hardship, and rising polarization there remains an urgent need for inclusive, locally led mechanisms to address grievances, rebuild civic trust, and lay the foundation for a just political transition.

In response to these challenges, the Taziz II Program was launched in 2023 to strengthen the Syrian political process. Taziz II works to empower civil society, enhance inclusive governance, and support transitional justice by creating safe spaces for dialogue, advancing accountability, and ensuring local communities have a voice in shaping their future. Grounded in the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the program promotes rights-based approaches to peace and governance.

Taziz II’s approach has proven to be vital in a complex and fragile context. By bridging civic and institutional divides, the program not only mitigates immediate tensions but also helps build the groundwork for long-term reconciliation, human rights protections, and inclusive, participatory governance in Syria.

In 2024, Taziz II delivered meaningful progress through its flagship initiative, the Euphrates Dialogues, in Deir Ezzor. Amid tensions following military operations and widespread service disruption, Taziz II convened over 40 dialogue sessions across 8 districts, engaging 600+ community members, including women, youth, and tribal leaders, and facilitated conversations on governance, justice, humanitarian access, and coexistence.

Key achievements include:

- Creation of a Detainees Affairs Office to address the fate of the disappeared and strengthen legal recourse;
- Community-led policy proposals on fuel access, education, and bread production, several of which were adopted by local councils;
- Structured plans for victim compensation and the reintegration of displaced populations, including families from al-Hol camp;
- Advocacy for a political parties law and fair municipal elections, building momentum toward pluralistic political participation; and
- Enhanced tribal engagement to mediate disputes and reinforce local governance structures.

With the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Taziz II’s programs in political dialogue and constitution building will be especially relevant as Syrians look with hope and high expectations to the new Syria Interim Government for meaningful peace and lasting change.



### Archiving Evidence of Human Rights Violations

As Yemen’s conflicts raged on in 2024, it remained paramount to collect, verify, and preserve open-source digital evidence of human rights violations. The Ansar Allah (Houthis) and other perpetrators of the conflict increased their persecution of civil society actors and journalists by using tactics such as arbitrary detention, prosecution, and forced disappearance. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula publicly claimed to have executed eleven people. Furthermore, the broader humanitarian and advocacy landscapes continued to deteriorate due to multiple converging crises: Ansar Allah shifted their governance structures, internal displacement increased, and reports emerged of Yemeni youth being deceptively recruited into Russia’s war with Ukraine.

Against this backdrop, the Yemen Human Rights Forensics Lab Plus (YHRFL+) was launched at the end of 2023 with the goal of increasing recognition and protection of human rights in Yemen. Working alongside the Yemeni Archive Project, YHRFL+ analyzes digital evidence of human rights violations through the context of international human rights frameworks. The initiative plays a dual role of empowering civil society to champion justice and increasing accountability through advancing human rights documentation and verification efforts.

By the end of 2024, YHRFL+ and the Yemeni Archive verified over 4,000 records and archived over 874,300 new digital materials, bringing the total archive to 2.5 million records sourced from more than 1,500 platforms. This growing body of evidence supported the creation of 33 investigative reports and documentation of

260 human rights cases, establishing a credible foundation for advocacy and transitional justice efforts. These advocacy efforts reached over 4.8 million individuals online and applied a trauma-informed, victim-centered approach in all documentation ensuring sensitivity, accuracy, and survivor safety throughout the process

Beyond digital archiving, YHRFL+ continued to fight for journalists pursuing justice. Notably, ongoing advocacy by YHRFL+, DT Institute, and Justice 4 Yemen Pact (J4YP) contributed to the

acquittal of Yemeni journalist Ahmed Maher, who had faced politically motivated charges for his reporting.

To ensure long term stability of human rights monitoring in Yemen, YHRFL+ prioritized increasing local capacity and strengthening the credibility of CSOs. The initiative organized 14 workshops that trained nearly 400 civil society actors in rigorous, ethical documentation practices. These workshops enhanced the ability of local actors to produce credible, evidence-

based reports of violations—critical in a context where international monitoring is limited.

YHRFL+ also advanced advocacy goals through direct engagement with high-level stakeholders. Representatives met with members of the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Canadian ambassador to Yemen, and the United Nations to raise awareness, present evidence, and press for global action in support of human rights and accountability in Yemen.



“This project marked a turning point for us at the Abductees’ Mothers Association. It enhanced our skills, improved team efficiency, and expanded our work in human rights advocacy. Importantly, it strengthened our ties within the J4YP coalition through joint activities like trainings, workshops, and public events.

We faced major challenges, yet we persevered. This project empowered us to keep advocating for justice.”

–Najla Fadel, Researcher, Abductees’ Mothers Association, YHRFL+



# Media and Technology



The free flow of information is a cornerstone of democracy. It fuels civic engagement, keeps power in check, and lifts the voices of all. That’s why authoritarian regimes target it; weaponized disinformation fractures societies, erodes trust in democratic institutions, silences dissent, and obscures the truth.

DT Institute is on the frontlines of this global struggle for truth. We partner with civil society and local communities in some of the most repressive environments in the world to protect digital freedoms and uphold the right to access independent, credible information. We equip partners with tools to protect their digital security, amplify marginalized voices, and strengthen civic engagement. In doing this, we are helping to ensure that all people—regardless of geography or identity—can speak out, organize, and shape their societies.

Independent media is a vital check on power and a critical voice for public interest. In many of the contexts where DT Institute works, independent journalists face harassment, censorship, and even violence for simply

reporting the truth. DT Institute strengthens the resilience of independent media through technical support, capacity building, and emergency funding. By supporting credible, local journalism we help ensure that facts—not fear—shape public discourse. Access to truthful, diverse information is not a privilege—it is essential to a functioning democratic society.

Building on the success of our established virtual private networks, in 2024 we expanded circumvention technologies into regions where censorship is the norm, not the exception. In addition to Iran, now over 2 million users in eight additional countries rely on DT Institute-supported technologies such as virtual private networks and innovative data-casting solutions to bypass firewalls and access content that their governments try to suppress. In places where internet shutdowns are wielded as weapons, these solutions are more than technical fixes—they are acts of resistance. They serve as the infrastructure of accountability, the foundation of freedom, and the pathway to a more informed, empowered, and democratic world.

## When Civil Society Organizations Admit Their Failures

The Civil Society Resilience Activity (CSRA) was launched to address the mounting challenges facing civil society in Serbia. Against a backdrop of shrinking civic space, widespread disinformation, increasing public skepticism toward CSOs, and a deeply polarized political environment, CSRA was designed to strengthen the resilience of civic actors and enhance their capacity to uphold democratic values, advocate for human rights, and rebuild public trust. Throughout its implementation, Serbia experienced ongoing political turbulence—including national elections and frequent government reshuffles—which often redirected civil society efforts toward short-term advocacy and crisis response. Socio-economic pressures and widespread dissatisfaction with public institutions further alienated youth and other non-traditional actors, such as artists, musicians, and business owners, from civic participation.

In response to this fluid and challenging context, CSRA adopted a flexible, phased strategy that combined capacity development, innovation, strategic communication, and cultural engagement. This approach focused on enhancing the capacity, visibility, and narrative influence of CSOs in Serbia. Working in coalition, DT Institute and its partners introduced innovative methodologies—including design thinking, values-based public messaging campaigns, and the creative use of pop culture—to combat disinformation, deepen democratic engagement, and restore trust in civil society.

Among CSRA’s diverse interventions were tailored trainings, mentorship initiatives, grassroots branding workshops, and media literacy programs. In 2024, CSRA built on the success of its previous initiatives by launching the second season of the Pop Culture Challenge. Nearly 80 creative proposals were submitted, each designed to engage the public in themes of democracy, human rights, and civil society through pop culture. From these, eight projects advanced to the Season Finale, which attracted over 100 attendees from NGOs, donors, and the creative sector. The event culminated in the selection of three winning projects, recognized for their innovative and impactful civic messaging. Winners of the challenge received mentorship and funding for their initiatives.

These winners included:

- ***Sex, Drugs, Violence, and Fear, by Dandelion Production.*** This web series for youth in Serbia consists of 13 episodes focused on issues faced by Gen Z, including personal autonomy and mental health.
- ***Crack and The City Shorts, by Milana Trifunja.*** A series of 20 short animations that use a humorous lens to remove barriers to conversations about gender equality, mental health, marginalization, and other social challenges.
- ***Stick the Idea, by Days of Urban Culture.*** Represents a direct fight against messages of hate and violence by deploying a sticker-based visual arts canvassing campaign and organizing workshops for CSOs.



# Peace Building

Violence and conflict are not only consequences of political breakdown, but they are also often fueled by the deliberate manipulation of identity, scarcity, and community-level grievance. In fragile states, violence can quickly spread to destabilize entire regions and create fertile ground for cycles of retribution and extremist narratives. Amid these complexities, communities are not only victims, but vital agents of change. DT Institute works alongside grassroots organizations to address the underlying

causes of discord through localized, community-driven efforts, like targeted awareness campaigns and capacity building initiatives. In contexts where national-level peace processes stall or exclude key voices, the efforts of civil society become a stabilizing force, pushing forward inclusive solutions that reflect the realities on the ground. Through this approach, DT Institute helps transform conflict zones into resilient, empowered communities capable of resisting violence and shaping their own peaceful futures.



## Strengthening Community Resilience from the Ground Up

The Building Inclusive Peace in Sudan (BIPS) program works across Blue Nile, South Kordofan, and Darfur to build an inclusive, democratic society by empowering youth as peacebuilders, promoting grassroots mobilization, and strengthening community resilience. Amid Sudan’s ongoing civil war, BIPS has partnered with 9 local NGOs to strengthen the peacebuilding capacities of individuals and CSOs, while also addressing the mental health needs of conflict-affected communities.

In 2024, BIPS grantees and NGOs held workshops for digital literacy, identifying and addressing misinformation, and promoting education to reduce dropout risk. Youth were trained in negotiation and mediation, equipping them with powerful conflict resolutions skills. BIPS also trained STEM teachers in creating engaging and supportive learning environments using hands-on activities that engaged participants across ages and backgrounds. This work is especially significant in the Blue Nile region, where conflict remains active, but some urban schools continue to operate despite risks such as drone strikes. While schools are shuttered in heavily impacted areas like Darfur and Khartoum, regions like Blue Nile sustain limited access to education—making BIPS’s work there both urgent and impactful.

To further expand its impact, BIPS established the Rapid Response Grants mechanism to engage grassroots activists and small, locally led organizations to implement innovative and effective solutions for conflict prevention. These grants enable highly flexible funding to put resources directly into the hands of those closest to the challenges, reflecting DT Institute’s unwavering belief that lasting development must be locally led, boldly supported, and globally reinforced.

Amidst the fear and distrust that violent conflicts can create, BIPS continued to support mental health efforts by organizing trauma recovery workshops focused on psychological first aid and coping with post-traumatic stress. Public events, such as theatre performances, raised awareness, provided outlets for emotional expression, and helped reduce stigma around mental health. Grantees also delivered direct trauma support services to internally displaced people.

BIPS grantees achieved direct results.

17

Peacebuilding Small Grants

5

Rapid Response Grants




500+ youth

developed critical peacebuilding skills and trauma support



500+ grassroots

actors have expanded capacity for conflict prevention activities



10,000 people

given essential mental health support



## Communications Campaigns for Conflict Resolution

In the wake of years of devastating conflict and the territorial defeat of ISIS, communities in northeast Syria continue to face deep and complex challenges—none more so than the families formerly associated with ISIS. These families endure profound social stigma, legal ambiguity, economic hardship, and security risks as they attempt to return and reintegrate into communities still reeling from trauma. Many remain isolated in displacement camps like al-Hol, or struggle with access to basic services, documentation, and protection from retaliation. In this volatile environment—marked by active security threats, political fragmentation, and fragile social cohesion—DT Institute’s Conflict Resolution in Syria Project (CRISP) emerged as a lifeline for rebuilding peace at the most grassroots level.

At the heart of CRISP was a bold vision: that communities, if equipped with the right tools and support, could interrupt the cycles of violence, foster reconciliation, and chart a path toward inclusive stability. Initially launched in 2023 in Raqqa, Tabqa, and surrounding areas, CRISP later expanded to include Deir Ezzor, aiming to break cycles of violence and promote lasting stability through two main strategies that were implemented in each community.

**Locally Led Crisis Committees:** CRISP established and trained Crisis Committees—diverse, gender-inclusive groups of local mediators—to resolve community conflicts and support the reintegration of vulnerable returnees. With training in trauma-informed mediation, advocacy, and gender sensitivity, the committees became trusted facilitators of peace. Over the course of the program, they resolved more than 11,000 cases, strengthening trust, social cohesion, and local resilience.

**Shifting Public Perceptions:** To reduce stigma and build understanding, CRISP launched “Bain Ahlkom”, a multimedia campaign that shared powerful stories of reconciliation through podcasts, short films, dialogue sessions, and community art. These efforts challenged harmful narratives and highlighted the shared humanity of returnees—especially women and children.

Operating in one of the world’s most complex environments, CRISP adapted to shifting threats with flexible operations, strong local partnerships, and an unwavering focus on community empowerment. It stands as a model for trauma-sensitive, inclusive peacebuilding—and a testament to the power of local leadership in driving sustainable peace.

# Impact Grants Highlights from 2024

DT Institute’s philanthropic approach is rooted in forward-looking, values-aligned investment that reaches those often overlooked by traditional funding models. We prioritize grassroots leaders, emerging movements, and local innovators who are best positioned to develop context-specific, sustainable solutions.

Our Impact Grants address root causes of instability by supporting locally led efforts to build resilience and seize fragile windows of opportunity. Whether advancing human rights in repressive environments or responding to entrenched conflicts, our funding catalyzes scalable models of civic engagement and democratic change.

From censorship circumvention tools to programs that strengthen media ecosystems, our targeted investments help local actors defend democratic values, protect human rights, and enhance institutional resilience in repressive environments. We support cutting-edge technologies, such as secure telecommunications and data-casting systems, to ensure civil society actors, youth, and grassroots movements can access and share information more freely. At the same time, we invest in independent media, civil society, and investigative journalism to catalyze accountability and develop lasting change at both local and national levels.

In 2024, DT Institute funded grants and technical support through three impact-focused funds: the Peace & Stability Fund, the Leadership Accelerator, and the Free & Independent Media Fund. Across these grants, young leaders graduated from political and civil society fellowship tracks, ethnic minority groups expanded their communication skills, a new measurement for peacebuilding programs was piloted to remarkable success, and front line human rights defenders received the first grants from a new rapid-response grant mechanism. DT Institute’s commitment to high-impact, locally informed, and scalable initiatives demonstrates how strategic philanthropy can respond to current challenges while shaping long-term democratic futures.



## Lifting Up Young Leaders in Iraq

DT Institute and American University of Iraq-Sulaimani have been supporting the development of Iraq’s future leaders through the Iraqi Leadership Fellows program since 2017. In 2024, the Iraqi Leadership Fellows program trained a diverse cohort of 32 young leaders to address Iraq’s most pressing governance and environmental challenges. In response to increasing challenges posed by drought, water scarcity, and desertification that threaten livelihoods and regional stability, Iraqi Leadership Fellows has made climate-focused leadership development a key component of its initiatives.

Over the course of their annual fellowship, fellows in the Social Activism or Political Mentor tracks develop the skills necessary to lead NGOs, influence policy, or shape diplomatic efforts. Each year, fellows participate in two intensive in-person workshops and four virtual mentorship sessions covering adaptive leadership, policy engagement, and climate-focused training. One-third of the curriculum focuses on Iraq’s escalating water scarcity and desertification, with expert-led sessions on hydro-politics and climate security. Iraqi Leadership Fellows program’s cross-track mentorship model fosters peer learning, while dynamic training formats—such as storytelling, group simulations, and community organizing labs—deepen practical skills. In 2024, a national alumni gathering brought together 52 graduates, with alumni from each of the previous cohorts to strengthen inter-cohort networks. The alumni also led advocacy efforts during a fundraising tour in Baghdad, meeting with representatives from four diplomatic missions.

The 2024 cohort achieved several key diversity and inclusion goals.

- The average age of the cohort was 29, emphasizing young leaders.
- The cohort represented 17 of Iraq’s 19 provinces, including under-served localities such as Dujail, Musayyab, Tel Afar, and Bardarash.
- Female participation remained strong with 41% of fellows being female, indicating strides in equalizing gender representation.

Since 2017, Iraqi Leadership Fellows program has graduated six cohorts, building a network of more than 200 alumni, comprising political actors, social change agents, and civil society innovators throughout Iraq.

## Building Capacity of the Karen People

DT Institute is leading efforts to advance democratic development and self-reliance in Myanmar for the Karen ethnic minority. The Karen are one of the most marginalized ethnic minority groups, and they have faced persistent political, social, and economic disadvantages throughout the country’s history. In response to this widespread repression, which includes restricted communication and political exclusion, the Karen Resiliency Project strengthens the community’s ability to self-govern, communicate securely, and advocate for a federal democratic future. Through targeted training and the deployment of secure telecommunications tools, the project is building local capacity to communicate and organize, contributing to DT Institute’s broader mission to support inclusive, community-driven governance across Myanmar.

In 2024, the first phase of this initiative laid critical groundwork for lasting impact. It delivered measurable progress in enhancing the Karen community’s ability to organize, communicate effectively, and amplify their voice in the push for democratic reform. Key achievements of Phase One included:

- **Innovative Training:** Over 50 Karen representatives from 11 organizations received advanced training in storytelling, strategic communications, and securely accessing the internet in a heavily censored environment.
- **Technology Deployment:** Delivery of cutting-edge telecommunications equipment, including 13 Starlink Kits and audio-visual production equipment, has empowered civil society groups and enhanced internal and external communication.
- **Capacity Assessment:** The program assessed the Karen’s needs and limitations to ensure that external assistance aligns with their goals of autonomy and democratic participation.

Additional phases of the programs will foster a cohesive and collaborative framework that unites ethnic minorities under a shared pursuit of democratic transformation.





## Defining Success for Peacebuilding Programs

A common challenge in international development programming is evaluating program effectiveness and impact both during and after implementation. To address this, the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) and DT Institute developed a streamlined, data-driven tool to measure peacebuilding outcomes: the Community Strength Survey. Drawing on 15 years of Positive Peace research, the survey captures quantitative insights into societal resilience through a concise set of indicators anchored in the eight Pillars of Positive Peace.

IEP and DT Institute deliberately prioritized clarity and scalability in the tool’s design. After an extensive literature review and rounds of expert feedback, they distilled the survey to ten core questions. This focused approach, paired with a Likert scale format, a rating scale used to measure survey participants’ opinions, attitudes, and motivations, converts qualitative sentiment into reliable, analyzable data while ensuring accessibility across cultures and literacy levels.

The survey underwent several testing phases. It was first piloted by international high school students in Florida, then refined, and field-tested in Kenya, Malawi, and Nepal with 267 respondents across diverse communities. These tests confirmed the tool’s cross-cultural relevance, ease of use, and effectiveness in capturing community perceptions.

The survey’s success highlights its potential for cost-effective, scalable implementation in a variety of development contexts. It offers organizations a practical method for benchmarking community resilience, validating programming strategies, and identifying emerging needs. Looking ahead, the Community Strength Survey represents a promising advancement in how peace impact is planned, monitored, and evaluated across the development sector.



## Equipping Human Rights Defenders

From Sudan to Serbia, Syria to El Salvador, human rights defenders—both courageous individuals and grassroots organizations—are facing an escalating wave of repression. Shrinking civic space, targeted violence, digital surveillance, and deepening authoritarianism have made the defense of basic freedoms a dangerous act. In the world’s most fragile and conflict-affected regions, standing up for dignity can mean detention, harassment, violence, and even death.

In response, DT Institute and The Carter Center launched the ACCELERATE Mechanism: a bold, two-pronged funding initiative that meets urgent needs of human rights defenders and unlocks the transformative potential of human rights defenders working at the frontlines of democracy and human rights.

The ACCELERATE Mechanism is designed to respond to both the immediate and long-term needs of human rights defenders by issuing:

- Programmatic Grants of up to \$50,000: To support organizations over the course of a year to implement locally led solutions that strengthen human rights, promote democratic values, and protect vulnerable communities.
- Action Grants of up to \$5,000: To offer rapid and responsive support for individuals and organizations facing urgent or emergent threats—helping them stay safe, active, and connected.

ACCELERATE is not just a grants program, it’s a commitment to solidarity, resilience, and locally led change. Grantees receive technical assistance, helping them turn vision into strategy. As part of the grant process, they also engage in a shared learning agenda, creating space for reflection, innovation, and adaptation.

- In 2024, ACCELERATE’s first cohort of human rights defenders made significant progress, including:
- Agenda Joven cultivated a vibrant network of youth leaders driving transformation in their communities in Colombia.
  - Centar E8 used pop culture—from film and art to digital media—to challenge stigma and reframe human rights narratives in Serbia.
  - Zambia National Women’s Lobby empowered rural women to step into roles as local advocates and defenders.
  - Additional emergency response Action Grants were deployed in Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and El Salvador, where security risks necessitate strict confidentiality, but the courage of recipients is no less powerful.

As threats to democracy grow, DT Institute stands firm in its belief: those most impacted by injustice are those best equipped to drive meaningful reform.





# Reflections

This section highlights the voices of our DT Institute project staff and partner organizations, whose firsthand experiences underscore the critical role of long-term international development assistance. Their voices emphasize how sustained support not only builds trust and resilience but also ensures that resources are placed directly into the hands of those closest to the challenges. By investing in local leadership, we reaffirm our unwavering belief that lasting development must be locally led, boldly supported, and globally reinforced.

## PRIVATE GRANT: THE ACCELERATE MECHANISM

“When we first reached out to DT Institute, all we had was a drawing—literally. With DTI’s belief in us, we found more than funding—we found room to grow, to experiment, to make mistakes and learn from them. Over time, what started as a hopeful doodle turned into a space where artists, activists, and dreamers could come together to spark real change.”

—Pop Culture Lab

“This kind of long-term support didn’t just help us face challenges—it helped us build something that lasts. In a world where funding can disappear overnight, that steady belief in our mission made all the difference.”

—Lena Bogdanovic, Centar E8

“One of the most inspiring and influential parts of this job is working with our civil society partners. I can’t stress enough how absolutely in awe I am of what they are able to do and how they are able to meet every challenge with grace, kindness, and especially humor in the face of a world filled with anger, fear, and grief. They meet those challenges in their own lives and through their work as if saying, ‘It’s not over yet. Together, we can still change this story.’ Building communities like the one established by Centar E8 and the Pop Culture Challenge that are driven by reason and logic, but also compassion and respect, is imperative to maintain spaces to sustain our work, drive for change, and to let us all know that we are not alone.”

—Allison Reed, DT Institute, Program Manager

## BUILDING INCLUSIVE PEACE IN SUDAN (BIPS)

“After sharing several pieces of content about peace, including the documentary film, people’s reactions shifted significantly, with many expressing support for peace initiatives. The initiative provided a platform for discussion, enabling people to engage in conversations and respond to comments about peace-related issues. This created a space that reduced tension and encouraged coexistence.”

—BIPS program Implementer

“Working with Sudan-based local partners has driven home how valuable and necessary support for civil society is, and how this support needs to be highly adaptable as conflicts change and the needs of our partners evolve.”

—Maha Tambal, DT Institute,  
Senior Program Manager

## YEMEN HUMAN RIGHTS FORENSICS LAB PLUS (YHRFL+)

“As a survivor of human rights violations, I understand how critical it is to center justice and local ownership in our work. Supporting local organizations over the long term has been one of the most meaningful parts of my role. I’ve seen partners grow into resilient, strategic actors, balancing human rights with broader security and stability challenges. These partnerships go beyond immediate needs; they build trust, protect civic space, and help counter harmful ideologies through credible local voices.”

—Feras Hamdouni, DT Institute,  
Senior Program Manager

“Partnering with DT Institute strengthened SAM’s capacity to document and address torture in Yemen, which gave us deeper insights into torture patterns, impunity, and victim impact... DT Institute’s trainings fostered a stronger, victim-centered approach. This project has been a strategic turning point, enhancing our reputation, expanding partnerships, and setting the foundation for sustainable, professional anti-torture work.”

—Tawfeeq Al-Houmaidi, SAM, CEO





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