

EIRENE

INTERNATIONALER CHRISTLICHER FRIEDENSDIENST e.V.



Magazine 1 | 2026

LIVING TOGETHER! VOLUNTEERING AT THE ARCHEN

Volunteers report:
EXCITING NEWS
FROM THE USA,
UGANDA AND
FRANCE

Lead article:
CONTEMPORARY
DEVELOPMENT
AND PEACE
POLICY

South Kivu:
DIFFICULT
TIMES IN THE
EAST OF THE DR
CONGO

Bolivia:
ENVIRONMENT
AND PEACE
TOGETHER
THINKING



Dear readers,

anyone who deviates from the 'norm' has a hard time of it; I've seen this first-hand. My father suffered from mental illness, and throughout my childhood and teenage years I watched as he was increasingly pushed to the margins of society: first he lost his job, then his marriage broke down, later he lost his driving licence, and finally, in his early 50s, he lost his life. Looking back, I have to say he had no support; we as a family couldn't really understand him, and society at large was even more overwhelmed by the challenge of finding a place for him with his illness.

People with physical and mental disabilities face no different a situation. They too are often misunderstood in their needs and are excluded from family life and society. EIRENE has been cooperating with the worldwide network of the Archen since 1979, and since then EIRENE volunteers have been working there to promote inclusion and participation. Even back then, the Archen had a revolutionary approach – not to cure, but to live together. This has given rise to impressive communities, something we also notice in the EIRENE volunteers who have served there. After their year abroad, most return changed. Their awareness of exclusion is heightened, and they are able to treat people who deviate from the 'norm' with greater understanding. Pages four to six provide insights into the long history of the Archen.

When you look at the global news, you too are likely to feel a sense of pessimism creeping in. In such times, it helps to reflect on your own sphere of influence: where can I make a contribution to peace in my everyday life? Treating people who deviate from social norms with empathy is a good yardstick for this. It is an act of solidarity, because mental illness or other disabilities can affect any one of us.

I hope you enjoy reading this

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stefan Heiß".

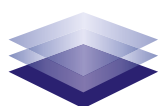
Stefan Heiß, Head of Public Relations



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About the cover photo: Sofia Schnell, an EIRENE volunteer at L’Arche International de Paris, and Maxence Requilliard, a resident of L’Arche, on a walk together in late 2025.



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Anne Barth (left) and Annika Knöbel (right) with François Vabre (centre) at L'Arche Toulouse. Photo: EIRENE archive.

SIMPLY LIVING TOGETHER!

47 years of voluntary service in the Arches, communities for people with disabilities

Without the extensive network of the Arches, the EIRENE voluntary service would be inconceivable. These are the placements where most EIRENE volunteers have worked to date. The first EIRENE volunteer began their service there as early as 1979. Since then, around 10 to 12 volunteers a year have spent 12 months sharing daily life with adults with mental health conditions in the Arches in France, Belgium, Canada, Uganda, Northern Ireland and Ireland. Every year, the volunteers return with a greater sense of responsibility and a changed perspective on disability – reason enough to report on this network:

What happens if, instead of trying to 'cure' people, we simply give them a home? This was the question posed by the Frenchman Jean Vanier in the 1970s, after returning deeply shaken from a visit to a psychiatric hospital. At that time, it was standard practice to lock people with mental health conditions away in hospitals and isolate them from society. They often lived for years in inhumane conditions. He wanted to change these conditions, which he found intolerable. He had a vision that people with disabilities could live and work as equal members of society. They should participate in social life and, like everyone else, visit the cinema or swimming

pool whenever they felt like it. For him, it was clear that every person, regardless of their condition or culture, contributes something to the community.

In 1964, he rented a house in Trosly-Breuil, north of Paris, and lived there with Raphael and Philippe, two men with intellectual disabilities. He named this house L'Arche. Vanier's approach to the Arches quickly attracted many followers; first throughout France and later in other countries, many Arches were established. The co-living of people with and without disabilities practised within them led to a shift in thinking in politics

and society. People with intellectual disabilities found that their needs were being listened to more closely.

In 2019, Jean Vanier's legacy came under severe strain when allegations of sexual abuse came to light. Specifically, 25 women testified in an independent inquiry that Vanier and a priest had exploited their spiritual authority between 1952 and 2019 to manipulate the women and coerce them into intimate, sexual acts. Vanier passed away that same year. Today, the Arches have clearly distanced themselves from their founder's actions. Extensive protection and prevention measures are now in place, independent reporting centres for abuse have been established, and the Arches provide training for all their staff.

Today, L'Arche International is a global network of around 150 communities in 35 countries. People with and without disabilities live together under the same roof. Everyone helps out with cooking, cleaning and tidying up. Playing sport, making music, singing together – there's always something going on in the L'Arche communities. All L'Arche communities share common values, but each one is independent, reflecting the specific country and culture. Most Arks work with volunteers who stay for over a year or on a day-to-day basis. These days, the volunteers and residents are usually supported by trained therapists. The homes are

often linked to small businesses such as market gardens, workshops or restaurants, where people can find work according to their skills and which help to fund the homes.

"I still have vivid memories of my voluntary service at L'Arche in Compiègne," says Ralf Ziegler, who completed his community service in Compiègne in 1985/86 as an EIRENE volunteer and now works full-time for EIRENE. "The people there taught me that no one should ever be excluded or discriminated against simply because they are 'different'. And that social commitment is worthwhile and should guide my actions for the rest of my life."

EIRENE currently sends volunteers to Arches in Uganda (Kampala), Canada (Lethbridge), Northern Ireland (Belfast), Ireland (Cork), France (Toulouse, Compiègne, Paris, St Antoine) and Belgium (Brussels).

by Anne Dähling

Sofia Schnell has been living and working as an EIRENE volunteer at L'Arche International de Paris since August 2025. We asked her about her first impressions of working in her 'foyer' (residential home) and of living alongside the 'personnes' (long-term residents with disabilities).

Outings into the countryside enrich the daily lives of both the volunteers and those in their care.

Charlotte Kretschmann during her voluntary service at L'Arche in Brussels.

Photo: EIRENE archive





“LIFE AT THE ARK IS LIKE BEING PART OF A SMALL FAMILY”

*Sofia Schnell lebt und arbeitet seit August 2025 als EIRENE-Freiwillige in der Arche International de Paris. Wir fragten sie nach ihren ersten Eindrücken von der Arbeit in ihrem „Foyer“ (Wohnstätte) und vom Zusammenleben mit den „personnes“ (dauerhafte Bewohner*innen mit Beeinträchtigungen).*

What has inspired you the most so far?

What inspires me most is the sense of community and openness that L’Arche radiates. Everyone is welcomed. You live in a community that becomes like a small family.

What has made you think?

What has particularly made me think – and even shocked me – is that ableism (note: ableism refers to the discrimination against people with physical or intellectual disabilities) remains deeply entrenched in society. Many people behave in a dismissive manner towards those with intellectual or physical disabilities. I believe it is very important to reflect on both one’s own behaviour and the wider environment in this regard, and to challenge stereotypical ways of thinking.

What do you particularly enjoy about your day-to-day work at the Arche? What not so much?

I particularly enjoy working with the residents, especially those little moments when the work feels more like leisure time and we laugh, sing and dance together. I also like taking on responsibility and don’t just tackle the tasks that ‘just happen to come up’. For example, I’m a co-mentor for a ‘personne’ and also have my own areas of responsibility. It’s very important to me not just to work for the Ark, but to actively help shape it. At first, I found it hard to get used to the 40–45-hour working week. Now, after six months, however, everything is slowly settling into a routine. It’s only the long team

meetings that I still find tiring.

If you were to return to Germany now, what would be different for you?

It feels I’ve become more open-minded and independent. Above all, I’m taking with me the wonderful experiences and a second home to which I can return at any time. The people I’ve met here and work with have, in a short space of time, become very important to me – I wouldn’t have expected that when I moved here.

It also finds it very valuable that I’m doing an IJFD (International Youth Volunteer Service) after my A-levels instead of going straight to university. A year abroad teaches you a lot about yourself and helps you develop new skills. Even though working at Die Arche isn’t necessarily my dream job, it’s still exciting and broadens my horizons. This period is definitely one of the most educational and interesting times of my life.

PLEASE SUPPORT MY VOLUNTEERING PROJECT IN PARIS





USA: BETWEEN HOPE AND DEPORTATION

Matthias Roos is serving as a 'senior' volunteer with the partner organisation Bernardo Kohler Center in Austin, Texas, USA. The centre provides guidance and support to migrants. Here, he reports on how the current political situation under the Trump administration is affecting work with migrants.

After my first stint as a volunteer at L'Arche in Brussels, I decided to extend my voluntary service. I am now in Austin, the capital of Texas. My placement is at the Bernardo Kohler Centre. The Centre is a small NGO dedicated to supporting and assisting migrants, particularly with applications for permanent residence permits with work authorisation – the so-called 'Green Card' – and even further on to citizenship. I work at the centre's reception, booking appointments and checking that our clients have all the necessary documents. At the moment, we are completely overwhelmed and have to refer people who come to us to other support services. Most of the migrants who come to us have a Latin American background, but we also advise people who have migrated to the US from Nepal.

The US immigration process used to be simpler, but this has changed dramatically under the Trump administration. This is particularly true for Latinos and Latinas – they are now at the top of the list for ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). The agency, which Trump has massively expanded, is now picking them up on the street and detaining them indefinitely without any reason. Here in Texas, ICE's presence isn't as heavy as it is in Minnesota, for example, but ICE agents here usually operate undercover.

My boss was at a court hearing with a client. As they were leaving the courthouse, two men approached them and identified themselves as ICE agents. They arrested the man, who is from Nepal, without any

real explanation. He has now been detained for three months. We have tried everything to get him out, but so far without success. Despite the current difficult situation, most migrants want to stay in the US, as they have often been living here for decades. Instead of leaving the country, they are trying to legalise their status here. The Bernardo Kohler Centre is doing its best to deal with all these requests, but unfortunately this is hardly possible in the current tense situation. The migrants hope that the political situation will change for the better again.

There is also a counter-movement that offers hope for change. For instance, after my mid-term seminar at the end of March, I also took part in a large 'No Kings' demonstration against the current deportation practices in Florida.

Hope for change – a demonstration in Florida against current deportation practices. Photo: Matthias Roos.





Kristin Bohla has been living and working with EIRENE's partner organisation CRO in Mbale, Uganda, since August 2025. In her report, she vividly describes how CRO helps street children find a path to a normal life and what her day-to-day work as an EIRENE volunteer is like.

It's hard to believe that my first few months in Uganda have already flown by. It feels as though I've only just packed my bags, and yet, at the same time, as though I've been living here for a whole year. A glance at my phone gallery, with over 1,300 photos, shows just how much has happened during this time: encounters, places, faces and moments that have changed my life. My start in Uganda was chaotic: delayed flights, missed connections, an unplanned night in Egypt, without my luggage. I finally arrived in Uganda on 3 August. After an induction seminar led by the EIRENE volunteer coordinator, an intensive three-week Luganda language course began in Kampala. Many children, but also adults in rural areas, do not speak the national language, English.

I lived with a host family for three weeks, getting to know the language, culture and everyday life. I became even more aware of how important listening and patience are before you can even begin to get involved.

Since September, I have been living in Mbale in eastern Uganda and working for the Child Outreach Organisation (CRO). CRO has been working to help street children since 1992. The organisation's vision is to support these children so that they become responsible

and independent individuals, and to reconcile them with their families.

Mbale is beautiful: with a view of Mount Elgon. At the same time, it is a place where children's rights do not apply to many children. Hundreds of children live on the streets here. Most of them are not orphans. They come from families broken by poverty, violence or separation. I accompany social workers on street patrols, talk to children and assist with counselling at the call-in centre. I also regularly help out at the Transit Home, a safe haven for boys trying to escape life on the streets. The Transit Home is located about 20 minutes outside Mbale, surrounded by nature. There are currently 15–20 boys living there. They help with cooking, cleaning the house and working in the fields, or play football. Alongside care, another important part of our work there is rehabilitation. In other words, constantly showing the boys that this is a better place to live than the streets. They learn many important life lessons, as they missed out on a lot at home. Alongside this, CRO also tries to reintegrate the children into their families of origin. For example, if children mention that they still have an aunt or grandparents, we try to make contact and check whether the child can live there.



Daily life at the CRO/Uganda Transit Home. Photo: Kristin Bohla

What particularly concerns me is that many problems are structural. Reintegration fails not because of a lack of will, but because of poverty, overwhelming demands and a lack of support. Government regulations prevent long-term solutions. Education remains out of reach for many. When five out of ten children end up back on the streets after reintegration, it often feels frustrating, and at the same time it makes it clear that this is about more than just individual fates. Nevertheless, I also see hope. At CRO, it is not just about provision, but about dignity and prospects. In small projects, the children learn practical skills, such as baking or a trade. These are small steps, but they mean self-efficacy and a future.

My daily life outside work is also intense: cooking with friends, long church services, washing clothes by hand, and conversations that go on late into the night. I learn something new every day: about this country, about inequality, and about myself.

For me, this voluntary service is not about 'helping', but about learning on equal terms. It means staying put,

even when things get tough. Listening, even when there are no quick fixes. And not looking away when children's rights are being violated. I owe my ability to be here to the many people who support this initiative. I am very grateful for that.

By Kristin Bohla

Find out more about EIRENE's voluntary service programmes and sign up now: eirene.org/freiwilliger-werden



BEYOND GOOD INTENTIONS

What challenges must peace and development policies address in order to remain relevant? During his two-year tenure as Executive Director of EIRENE, Ali Al-Nasani engaged in lively dialogue with both high-ranking politicians and civil society peace actors from the Global South. In his article, he calls for a persistent presence and for keeping the prospects for peace alive even under difficult conditions.

Current debates on development and foreign policy can no longer be conducted in isolation from fundamental questions of peace. In a world of multiple crises – ranging from climate change and geopolitical power shifts to social inequalities – both state actors and civil society organisations face the challenge of redefining their roles. For the German government, in particular the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), this means aligning development policy strategies more closely with peace policy and translating global responsibility into concrete political processes. At the same time, peace organisations such as EIRENE and other development policy initiatives are called upon to further develop their approaches and to bring their practical experience into political debates. If peace policy is to remain credible overall, it must address climate justice, decolonisation, power sensitivity and global inequality, and understand these as integral components of a contemporary peace and development agenda.

It is clear that commitment alone is not enough. Peace work thrives on the dedication of many people – in government departments, international organisations and civil society initiatives alike – yet good will is no substitute for strategic clarity or political impact. Government programmes face limitations just as much as projects run by non-governmental organisations. Anyone wishing to defuse conflicts must realistically assess the scope for action available to each party and recognise their different roles: Whilst political institutions such as the BMZ have resources and the power to shape policy, organisations such as EIRENE often contribute

long-standing local partnerships, trust and flexibility.

Moral conviction can provide guidance, but it does not automatically exert pressure on powerful actors, who are often in a position to sit out or delay demands.

It is particularly in the contexts of development policy and foreign policy that it becomes clear that peace is far more than the absence of military violence. Issues of historical responsibility, structural inequality and economic dependencies are closely linked to the causes of conflict. This highlights the need for cooperation between different actors: political decision-makers establish framework conditions and international agreements, whilst civil society organisations critically monitor these, assist with implementation and bring in input from affected communities. Legal norms and international agreements are important points of reference, but they do not enforce themselves. They are interpreted in the light of political interests, implemented only partially, or even ignored entirely. A peace policy that ignores power relations – regardless of whether it is state-led or driven by civil society – runs the risk of remaining ineffective.

It is also striking that migrant perspectives, queer voices and social issues often play only a minor role in both government strategies and parts of the traditional peace movement. Yet it is precisely these actors who are shaping current social debates on participation, discrimination and the distribution of resources. Their limited influence contributes to many young people seeking other forms of political engagement, for example in climate policy or anti-globalisation initiatives that link ecological and social issues more closely. This

„Many sustainable contributions to peacebuilding arise in unspectacular areas such as educational work and confidence-building.“ Ali Al-Nasani

Together with its partner ORFED, EIRENE has been training children and young people in the Sahel for many years in how peace and non-violence can be put into practice. Photo: EIRENE archive



presents both state and non-state actors with the task of developing more inclusive approaches and forging new alliances. EIRENE, too, must seek allies in Germany beyond the usual spectrum if it wishes to emerge from the niche of development cooperation and make use of its scope for action.

At the same time, the focus of peace policy debates has shifted. Traditional issues such as arms control remain important, but must be complemented by concerns regarding hybrid warfare, digital disinformation and democratic resilience. Here, too, it is clear that visibility alone is not enough. Public pressure can drive processes forward, but it can also reinforce obstacles. Many sustainable contributions to peacebuilding arise from the interaction between government programmes and civil society engagement in unspectacular areas such as educational work, networking and long-term trust-building.

Peace and development processes rarely follow a linear path. They arise from ongoing negotiations in which timing, process design and informal communication play a central role. Which issues are addressed first, which stakeholders are involved and which channels of communication remain open have a decisive impact on a project. Here, state and civil society approaches

often complement one another: whilst state actors structure formal processes, organisations such as EIRENE facilitate informal spaces for dialogue and maintain a continuous on-the-ground presence. Projects that focus on mediation, on keeping dialogue channels open and on the ability to prevent escalations are often more important than attempts to achieve spectacular project successes.

Power imposes real limits. Not every morally compelling goal is politically achievable. This applies to governments just as much as it does to non-governmental organisations. Greater pressure does not automatically expand the scope for action; sometimes it narrows it. At the same time, realism does not mean resignation. Even powerful actors are dependent on legitimacy, procedures and time. These dependencies create opportunities for influence – whether through diplomatic initiatives, technical cooperation or the persistent work of civil society organisations, which often drive change step by step.

Development, diplomacy and peace are therefore more closely intertwined than ever before. Effective peace and development work arises precisely from the interaction between state and civil society actors and operates within the tension between idealism and practicality.



EIRENE volunteers are protesting in the Hambach Forest against deforestation and coal mining.

It requires a balance between the will to act and sober analysis, between a long-term vision and concrete intermediate steps. In this context, hope does not mean naive optimism, but rather a professional approach to recognising and making use of existing opportunities.

A peace and development policy that takes these interconnections seriously, reflects on its strategies and forges new social alliances can become more relevant. It can become a space where state responsibility and civil society engagement work together to jointly shape global justice, ecological transformation and democratic self-assertion. Sustainable peace and development work rarely works through grand gestures, but through persistent presence, skilful process design and the ability to keep options open even under difficult conditions.



About the author:

After two years as managing director of EIRENE, Ali Al-Nasani is returning to South-East Asia, drawn back by personal and professional ties. There, he will be working on behalf of Brot für die Welt to promote human rights and peace in Myanmar.



A On 30 October 2025, the EIRENE project "Strong Neighbours" will be recognised as a best-practice example at the Rhineland-Palatinate Integration Awards. Stephan Amstad (Neuwied Youth Welfare Office), project manager Iyad Asfour, Mayor Peter Jung and EIRENE Managing Director Ali Al-Nasani will receive the award from Minister Katharina Binz.

A YEAR OF STRUGGLE IN SOUTH KIVU



These are difficult times for the people of South Kivu, the eastern province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Violence, murder and displacement were rife in 2025 in EIRENE's partner country. How are international peace efforts perceived, what role does the armed group M23 play, and what scope do civil society actors still have to work towards peace?

The Washington peace process

Over the past year, the security and humanitarian situation in South Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, has deteriorated dramatically. While high-level diplomatic efforts most recently a US-brokered agreement between the DRC and Rwanda signed in Washington have sought to de-escalate tensions, everyday reality for civilians tells a different story. Violence, displacement, and fear continue to shape daily life, raising serious questions about peace processes that remain disconnected from realities on the ground. The Washington agreement reflects a long-standing limitation of international diplomacy in eastern Congo: the tendency to frame the conflict as a bilateral dispute between states. In reality, the violence in eastern DRC is driven by a complex web of actors, including armed groups, proxy forces, local militias, state actors driven by national and regional interests. Diplomatic initiatives that exclude these dominant actors or fail to establish credible mechanisms for accountability struggle to produce

tangible results.

“International peace initiatives often focus on actors at the state level, but conflicts are experienced and resolved at the community level. If local actors are excluded, it is difficult to translate agreements into real change on the ground.” Salima Kabasha Dorcas, coordinator of the EIRENE partner organisation Femmes Artisanas de la Paix (FAP) and peace activist.

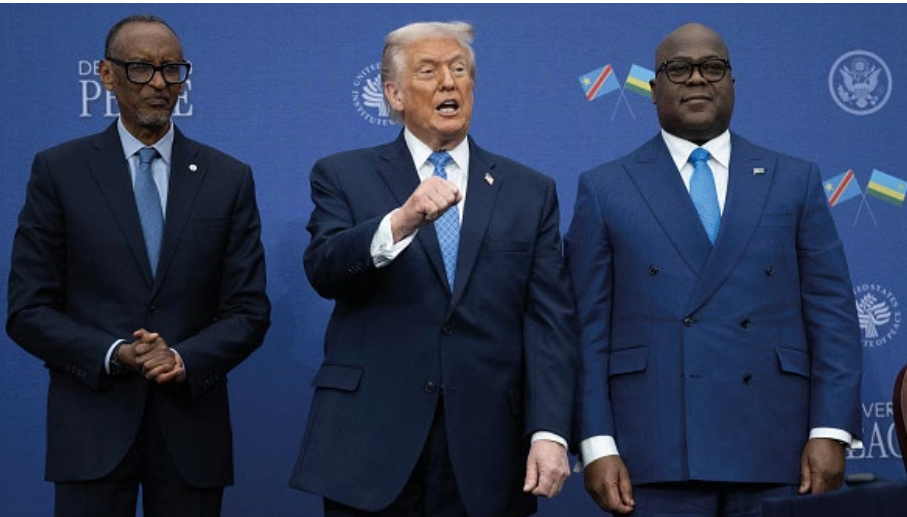
The Washington peace process does not include all key stakeholders and, so far, does not provide for any effective mechanisms to monitor the ceasefire. At the same time, there appear to be no deterrents against breaches of the ceasefire, and despite positive announcements from the mediators, none of the warring parties seems motivated to abide by the agreements.

This challenge is not a new one. Regional initiatives such as the Luanda and Nairobi processes, as well as the presence of the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO, have sought to stabilise the region. However, these efforts often run in

parallel rather than forming part of a coordinated strategy, leaving the civilian population caught between announcements of peace and ongoing insecurity.

Furthermore, the Washington peace process is still ongoing. Although a framework agreement has been signed, which is intended to ultimately lead to a comprehensive peace treaty, only two of the eight protocols have actually been signed. The remaining six are the subject of ongoing discussions and negotiations. Only when all the protocols have been signed and clear, legally enforceable commitments and deadlines have been established will there be a comprehensive peace agreement.

“When people talk about peace agreements, they often forget what conflict feels like in everyday life. For many families in South Kivu, the absence of peace means not knowing whether they will sleep in their own homes tonight, whether their children will be able to go to school tomorrow, or whether the violence will return without warning.” Salima Kabasha Dorcas



has been paid to women and girls, who are disproportionately affected by insecurity and displacement.

By Michael Odhiambo, EIRENE peace worker, and Malumbe M'mangwa Maluxe of FAP

On 4 December 2026, Donald Trump brings together the heads of state of Rwanda, Paul Kagame (left), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Félix Tshisekedi (right), to sign a so-called peace agreement. Trump hopes that the agreement will pave the way for the US to gain access to critical minerals in the east of the DRC. Photo: Andrew Caballero-Reynolds

Civil society in South Kivu: Still active.

“In times of great uncertainty, we have not stopped our work, but adapted it. We have restricted our movements, adapted our activities and focused on mediation and social cohesion, because a complete withdrawal would have made the communities even more vulnerable.”
Salima Kabasha Dorcas.

In this difficult context, local civil society organisations have played a crucial role. As violence escalated and displacement increased, local actors were often the first – and sometimes the only ones – able to respond. Their work focused on protecting the civilian population, promoting social cohesion and preventing further violence at the community level. The

EIRENE partner organisation Femmes Artisanas de la Paix (FAP) was at the heart of this response, despite operating under significant security constraints. As displacement increased, particularly in and around Uvira, FAP adapted its activities to ensure the safety of its staff and the community’s peace-building structures, whilst continuing to support the affected communities.

FAP places great emphasis on maintaining social cohesion and preventing local conflicts. Through theatre performances, discussion groups, mediation groups, radio plays and the involvement of young volunteers, the organisation brings people together. This helps to alleviate tensions and conflicts related to displacement, access to shelter and the distribution of humanitarian aid. Particular attention

THE RIGHT TO CLEAN WATER

Families in the village of Escoma on Lake Titicaca finally have access to clean drinking water. Thanks to the joint efforts of EIRENE's new partner organisation, Fundación Nuna, and the local community, the drinking water system has been upgraded. This was urgently needed, as the water level has been falling steadily for around 10 years and toxic heavy metals are contaminating the lake water.

Photo: Maby Diana Cordero Quisbert



“WATER IS OUR KIN”

Magdalena Zimmer has been working in Bolivia since last November with EIRENE's partner organisation, Fundación Mujeres en Comunidad (FMEC). This new partnership supports indigenous women in the protection and sustainable use of Lake Titicaca. Even before she left, Magdalena had been reflecting on the connection between peace and the environment.

Environmental Peacebuilding – a new, almost trendy buzzword. Peacebuilding is suddenly being considered in the context of the environment. It sounds exciting at first. At the same time, I ask myself: Was peacebuilding really conceived of without the environment before? So is environmental peacebuilding actually a revolutionary approach? Or is it rather something that has simply been given a new name in the international debate, whereas many indigenous communities have been aware of precisely these connections between the environment,

community and conflict for generations, and have been living and practising them? How can peace work be linked to environmental issues? And is it even possible to conceive of peace without the environment, gender justice and colonial continuities?

What is needed, then, is feminist and decolonial environmental peacebuilding. But is that even possible for a white, German peace expert working in Bolivia on issues such as access to water and women's political participation? These questions have

been very much on my mind during the preparatory phase for my new role as an EIRENE peace expert, and they continue to be so to this day. In various training courses on the environment, peacebuilding and conflict analysis, I focused particularly on the approach of environmental peacebuilding. This is a concept that links environmental issues with peacebuilding. It asks how issues such as water scarcity, environmental pollution or access to natural resources can exacerbate social inequalities and influence or even fuel conflicts. My main focus was on

incorporating feminist, intersectional and decolonial perspectives.

Who is particularly affected by environmental problems? Who decides on resources? And whose knowledge is heard and whose is not?

More than just an asset

Whilst water is generally regarded as a useful resource in many international political or economic debates, I came to realise the deeper significance water holds for many indigenous communities:

"For the Western world, water is a resource, an input that can be measured in cubic metres [...], an economic commodity subject to the laws of the market [...], a kind of 'blue gold' [...]. But for us, the indigenous communities, this view is not only incomplete, but profoundly wrong. Our stance springs from the memories of our grandmothers and grandfathers [...], from the wisdom of our peoples. Water is not a resource; it is life itself. It is not a commodity, but a sacred being with which we weave our existence [...]. Our relationship with water is not one of ownership or objectification, but one of reciprocity. The river is not simply a watercourse that crosses our territory. It is a relative, an open vein of Mother Earth that sustains us and sustains all life on this world [...]. Like us, water is born, it flows, it sings, it can become angry, and it too needs care. When we pollute a water source, we harm ourselves.

We are not damaging a resource; we are making a family member ill [...]. This worldview is the foundation of our resilience and the reason why, despite centuries of dispossession, we remain the best guardians of the headwaters of our rivers and waters [...]. Water, as a collective fabric within the water community, is the great connector. It is not an individual asset, but a common good that sustains collective life. [...]

There is no important ceremony in which water is not present. It is the mediator through which we give thanks, ask for permission and purify ourselves [...]. In waterfalls, in sacred lakes and in rivers, inhabited by our guardian spirits, the keepers of the water, we learn that taking more than is necessary is an insult. That is why we cannot allow dams to dry up our rivers, which are our paths and our temples [...]. We cannot accept that mining poisons the veins of our Mother Earth with cyanide or mercury." (Libertad Ksren Ortega Foronda, Marca Kosko Central Agrarian Federation)

After three months of preparation, my work with the Fundación Mujeres en Comunidad (FMEC) in Bolivia has now properly begun. I'm noticing how these very perspectives are increasingly coming to the fore in my day-to-day work.

When I observe how FMEC works and the knowledge that people in the communities around Lake Titicaca bring to the table, the

answer seems relatively clear to me. Many of the practices discussed today under the term 'environmental peacebuilding' are by no means new. They are ways of engaging with the environment and the community that have existed for generations.

Accordingly, the challenge lies less in developing new concepts and more in taking this traditional knowledge seriously, making it visible and integrating it more fully into political and social processes. FMEC's work therefore seeks to highlight these connections, as environmental issues are always also issues of social justice, power relations and political participation. In many communities, women bear central responsibility for water, agriculture and the well-being of their families. At the same time, they are scarcely involved in political decision-making processes.

The central role of women

"Historically, women have rarely been involved in decisions and issues relating to water and the environment, primarily due to macho and patriarchal structures that persist in many rural communities to this day. For women in farming communities, however, water is life itself. Without this element, they could not sustain their livelihoods. That is why the political empowerment of rural and indigenous women is crucial, so that their voices are heard and they can defend their livelihoods and territories. At the same

time, women also preserve many traditional practices for protecting the environment, such as the propagation of native seeds, which is important for the communities' food security, or agricultural practices such as mixed cropping and crop rotation. Through these practices, women also promote a harmonious coexistence with nature, based on reciprocity and respect for Pachamama (Mother Earth), that is, on the principle of give and take." (María Mercedes Vargas Apaza, Director of FMEC)

For me personally, it is particularly exciting to be part of this early phase and to support the new partnership between EIRENE and FMEC. Rather than joining organisational structures that have been in place for years, I am currently experiencing a process of joint exploration, shaping and development. Together with the FMEC team, we are working to strengthen our links with the communities around Lake Titicaca and local institutions. We will be travelling to these communities with the aim of analysing environmental issues alongside local people and developing approaches that combine ecological sustainability with social justice. Even though the work is only just beginning, one thing is already clear: peace work in the context of the environment and climate change means, above all, bringing together different perspectives, making existing knowledge visible and initiating long-term processes. It is precisely in this initial phase, therefore, that there is a special

dynamic and an opportunity to shape new paths together.

And so I am not yet able to give a clear answer to the question I posed at the outset: whether feminist, decolonial environmental peace work is even possible from my position. What I can say is that it requires a high degree of reflection, sensitivity and a willingness to continually scrutinise one's own perspectives from a critical perspective on power. I am aware that international cooperation always carries the risk of unintentionally reproducing existing power structures or colonial continuities. This is precisely why continuous exchange, listening and learning together with local people seem so crucial to me. When I see how reflective and power-critical FMEC's work is, and how many perspectives are included and taken seriously, it gives me hope. Whether and how I succeed in putting this into practice in my own work remains to be seen in the coming months.

About the author:

Magdalena Zimmer is a social worker and has been working as an EIRENE peace worker at FMEC within the CPS UMA programme since November 2025



NON-VIOLENT SOCIAL WORK IN TIMES OF CRISIS

In times of war and the erosion of democracy, can social work be more than just a repair service? Can it have a preventive effect and help to prevent wars? Josef Freise, a member of the board of the EIRENE Foundation and professor of social work, has written a book on this subject. In it, he explores the theory of non-violence and demonstrates how non-violent social engagement is an effective alternative to the dynamics of international conflict. We asked him for insights into his book.

Your book “Nonviolent Social Work for Peace and Democracy” was published at the start of the year. What inspired you to write it?

Josef Freise: My personal motivation stemmed from a desire to counter the sense of gloom that arose with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and then, twenty months later, with the horrific Hamas attack on Israel. The motivation was to break free from that sense of powerlessness.

I decided to reflect on and write down what I have learnt and done over the decades regarding non-violence, both as a staff member and supporter of EIRENE and as a professor of social work at the Catholic University of Applied Sciences NRW in Cologne.

Social work has a reputation for being nothing more than society’s ‘repair shop’. How do

you see its potential, and what role does your new book play in this regard?

The tradition of critical social work offers great potential for innovation. This book aims to encourage people to champion peace-building and democracy and to drive forward structural change in social work.

Who is this book written for?

The book is aimed at two groups: students and lecturers in social work, and people who wish to campaign for peace and democracy within civil society. It is an academic text, but is also accessible to informed and interested readers of daily newspapers.

For many people who, like you, have long been committed to non-violence and peace, global politics since 2022 must seem like a return to darker times. How do

you view the world out there at the moment?

With all this rearmament and militarisation, we are definitely heading down the wrong path. The causes I have championed for years – overcoming violence, non-violence, disarmament and conscientious objection – are now completely on the back foot. I realise, of course, that we cannot do away with the military overnight and that we cannot simply paint a rosy picture of the world, but it must surely be clear that the path we are currently on could only lead to further escalations of violence and, ultimately, even to a nuclear war.

Your book is a transdisciplinary foundation; it draws on various disciplines, including the study of religion, psychology, education and political science. In addition to the concept of structural violence, coined by

Johan Galtung, you also use the concept of epistemic violence. What distinguishes it?

Episteme is the Greek term for knowledge. Epistemic violence refers to violence that is deeply 'hidden' within our system of knowledge. I like to explain this using the example of Christopher Columbus. We say: Columbus discovered America. But it wasn't a discovery, as people were already living there; it was, rather, a bloody conquest. Another example: we speak of 'development aid'. This term, too, obscures the violence wrought by the 'helping' and 'developed' industrialised nations through their policies of power and exploitation. I am delighted that EIRENE, through the anti-racist transformation process, is addressing this issue as an organisation.

As a university professor, you have conducted extensive research into the topic of migration, a field that is permeated by structural and

epistemic violence. How should social work respond to this, and how can we achieve harmonious coexistence?

Living together harmoniously requires empathy – an understanding of the circumstances of people who come from different backgrounds and face different living conditions to my own. Unfortunately, migration is currently often demonised in public debate as the root of all problems. This was very clear during the last general election, when it seemed as though there were no other issues apart from migration. Ultimately, this was simply a clever diversion from other issues relating to social justice.

Social media, of course, also plays a part in this ...

Tech billionaire Elon Musk has said that Europe's problem is empathy. He claims we aren't making progress because we're always being considerate. To me, he embodies a way of life and work characterised

by 'over-thinking'. Men like him wield incredible influence today. Through the news service X, he shapes our everyday thinking; through his Starlink satellite system, he influences the course of the war between Ukraine and Russia.

My book should therefore also be seen as a critique of 21st-century capitalism. In this regard, I draw on the work of Professor Martin Andree of the University of Cologne. He states clearly: "Big Tech must go", because the emergence of artificial intelligence guided solely by capitalist principles poses a huge threat to our ability to live together.

Our task in the current climate, in which the hegemonic power of the USA is withdrawing from Europe and China and Russia are attempting to exert influence over us, is to practise a form of coexistence based on human rights, extending right into the digital realm. Platforms such as Facebook, which give space to fake news and accept no



EIRENE is taking part in the peaceful protest in Büchel, Rhineland-Palatinate, against the US nuclear weapons stationed there. Photo: EIRENE archive



Civil society's non-violent activism in Neuwied: During the Neuwied Carnival in February 2024, local residents protested against the rise of right-wing populism and the growing influence of the AfD in Neuwied. Photo: EIRENE archive

responsibility whatsoever for the content published, are therefore incompatible with this approach. Wikipedia, on the other hand, is an example of how controversial topics can be handled responsibly in the digital sphere.

What personal experiences have shaped your decision to dedicate your life to non-violence and peace work?

As a teenager in 1968, I witnessed the East-West confrontation between the communist bloc, led by the Soviet Union, and the capitalist bloc, led by the USA. That year, attempts were made in Czechoslovakia to reform communism. These attempts, known as the 'Prague Spring', were violently

suppressed by the invasion of Soviet and East German troops. At the time, I was faced with the choice of joining the Bundeswehr or refusing military service. It was clear to me that under no circumstances would I take up arms. I knew my family's stories from the Second World War.

During this time, I met the peace activists Hildegard Goss-Mayr and Jean Goss, who showed us non-violent ways to stand up against injustice. One of the Czech leaders of the non-violent protests in Prague against the Soviet occupation was Václav Havel – he would later become his country's president.

Ultimately, I have learnt that peace is never truly achieved through the military. You cannot create peace

with weapons. Perhaps you can achieve a ceasefire with weapons, but peace comes through a change in people's minds, through raising awareness, through consciousness-raising work, through certain attitudes, and that is something you can learn.

Even under extreme conditions, such as during the Second World War, individual non-violent initiatives proved successful. Denmark did not fight against the German Wehrmacht – the Danes saw no military chance of success – but despite the occupation, almost all Danish Jews were taken abroad and thus saved thanks to the moral courage of many Danes.

I come from the Münsterland region. There, Bishop Galen stood up to the Nazis when they began taking people with disabilities from Catholic care homes to kill them. Bishop Galen preached against these crimes, and my father, who was actually a Nazi sympathiser, helped, like many others, to distribute copies of this sermon. In fact, the public outcry became so great that Hitler and Goebbels halted the 'euthanasia' programme in the Münsterland region and postponed it until after the 'final victory'. These examples have shown me how one can stand up non-violently against injustice and dictators – which, of course, is fraught with risks and comes at a price. One may suffer professional setbacks, end up in prison, or even lose one's life. I have been convinced by this path of non-violence. With the concepts of an alternative security policy ("Rethinking Security" and "Social Defence"), we have sound guidelines for non-violent engagement, but we must be familiar with them and practise them. I see EIRENE as a place where this is already happening to some extent and could be significantly strengthened.

Josef, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts, and I wish you every success in your future work.

The interview was conducted by Stefan HeiB.



About the author:

Josef Freise is an educationalist and theologian. Until his retirement, he taught and conducted research for 20 years at the Catholic University of Applied Sciences in Cologne, specialising in interfaith dialogue, social work with migrants and international peace education. He continues to be extensively involved in voluntary work within civil society, including with EIRENE and Gewaltfrei Handeln e.V.

josef-freise.de



The book is available in bookshops (for €38) and from Beltz Juventa as an e-book (for €34.99). It can be borrowed from libraries (via interlibrary loan if necessary). ISBN 978-3-7799-8412-2



NEVER FORGET THE CRIME

Nicaragua has been under a dictatorship since 2018. EIRENE's partner organisation, Colectivo Nicaragua Nunca Más (CNM), documents human rights violations and supports people who have been forced to flee to neighbouring Costa Rica. The exhibition "Museo de la Memoria – Lo que no debemos olvidar" has now opened in San José, Costa Rica, giving a voice to the victims of the Ortega regime.

"Nicaragua has a long history of wars, impunity, injustices and profound inequalities. This legacy has led to recurring violence, oppression and dictatorships, under which several generations have suffered throughout Nicaragua's history. In the face of the current Ortega/Murillo dictatorship and the official policy of amnesty and forgetting, the collective 'Nicaragua Nunca Más' insists that the past can only be overcome if we can understand it, represent it and remember it in a civil society and educational context. This is the first step on the path to justice."

With these words, EIRENE partner CNM launched the exhibition in San José. It is the largest and most comprehensive attempt to date to address the events in Nicaragua since 2018. The exhibition counters the Ortega regime's attempts to deny human rights violations and shirk responsibility. Visitors have the opportunity to learn how real oppression works in Nicaragua: people describe how they were threatened by the regime, how relatives were murdered and why they had to flee. The exhibition's sources include interviews conducted by CNM with Nicaraguans in exile in Costa Rica, the work of journalists and documentation of human rights violations sent to the United Nations. Based on these sources, the CNM team has identified certain patterns and phases that vividly trace the

path of oppression and suppression of critical voices, civil society, educational institutions, the media, etc.

A visitor to the exhibition, who until recently lived in Nicaragua, says: "The exhibition offers an alternative account of recent history. It refutes the values of peace, solidarity and Christianity propagated by the Nicaraguan state by documenting the Ortega regime's terror against its own people. It is good to see the truth of recent years set out in black and white."

To illustrate the complex machinery of oppression and intimidation employed by the Ortega regime, the exhibition is divided into four sections:

1. A timeline of key events since the brutal crackdown on the 2018 protests,
2. a section highlighting the strategy of repression and showing both the phases and methods used to punish dissidents,
3. an organisational chart of the perpetrators who, according to CNM research, bear primary responsibility for the atrocities of the repressive system (currently 126 individuals),
4. and a path to justice that offers concrete



The aim of the exhibition in San José is to give a voice to the victims. Photo: CNM



“By documenting human rights violations, we are continuing to put pressure on the Ortega government.”
 Braulio Abarca

recommendations for action on how Nicaragua can return to freedom and justice.

The aim of the Museo de la Memoria, or ‘Museum of Memory’, is not merely to reach Nicaraguan exiles in Costa Rica, but rather to appeal to a wider audience. The exhibition helps to ensure that more and more people are made aware of the abuses in Nicaragua and take action. As Braulio Abarca, a CNM staff member, said in an interview with EIRENE: “The only way out of the dictatorship can be civil, peaceful and non-violent! It may take a long time, but I am hopeful that this

will happen. To achieve this, it is necessary to continue putting pressure on the Ortega and Murillo government.”

By Jürgen Kraus

CREATE WILLS ONLINE – A NEW SERVICE FROM EIRENE



Have you inherited something and would like to organise your estate? Or are you looking to draw up a will and considering including EIRENE, a charitable organisation, in your last will and testament? We would be happy to assist you with this. Using our new portal, you can easily and simply create a legally valid will that you simply need to copy out and sign.

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If you would like to include EIRENE in your will, we would be delighted if you could contact us in advance. This will allow us to answer any questions you may have in person and advise you on the best way to structure your estate.

Anne Dähling, daehling@eirene.org, 02631/8379-18.

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THE EIRENE FOUNDATION – SECURING LASTING PEACE



“In a world that seems increasingly dominated by the law of the jungle, I believe it is particularly important to support stable, long-term efforts towards peace.

Without peace, efforts to protect the climate and the environment will repeatedly be set back. EIRENE’s work is not only characterised by its on-the-ground projects; it also enables young people to gain experience working towards a united world through its voluntary programmes. In this way, I would like to do my bit to ensure that EIRENE can plan for the long term.” Stefan Schlösser, former EIRENE volunteer and co-founder.

Since its establishment in 2000, it has been committed to ensuring that peace work remains independent, united and effective. Every endowment and every loan helps to enable projects for justice, understanding and sustainable peace.

By making an endowment, a bequest or providing an interest-free loan to the EIRENE Foundation, you are making a lasting investment in peace and justice and safeguarding EIRENE’s independence and capacity to act.

Forms for an endowment or a loan can be found at eirene.org/stiftung. Please do not hesitate to contact Gisela Kurth, gisela.kurth@web.de, 0163/7542361, or Anne Dähling, daehling@eirene.org, 02631/8379-18

The EIRENE Foundation provides a reliable basis for the long-term commitment of the EIRENE e.V. association.

EIRENE 
STIFTUNG



Volunteers and professionals, staff and the board, friends and interested parties, young and old – the 2025 Pentecost meeting in Hanover was once again an opportunity for inspiring conversations and a joyful get-together.

INVITATION TO THE PENTECOST MEETING 2026



REGISTER NOW!

We would like to warmly invite you to this year's Whitsun gathering in Walberberg near Bonn from 23 to 25 May. Let's spend two inspiring days together, filled with discussion and fellowship. In addition to the EIRENE General Meeting on Saturday afternoon and Monday morning, there will be a varied programme showcasing our peace service.

A particular focus this year will be on the renewal of the EIRENE principles. What should the future of the EIRENE Peace Service look like? What utopia do we want to work towards? Bring your ideas and your commitment to the table.

You can find more information and the registration form at:

<https://eirene.org/meldungen/eirene-pfingsttreffen-2026-235-bis-255-walberberg>





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