

# THE CARTER CENTER



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### Countering Daesh Recruitment Propaganda Workshop 3

#### Muslim Civic Engagement: Countering Islamophobia and Immunizing Communities

*January 2017*

#### **Executive Summary**

On January 24 – 26 2017, The Carter Center (TCC) organized its third reiterative workshop designed to identify flaws in Daesh’s narratives, develop a twin approach to discredit Daesh propaganda and the rise of Islamophobia, as well as to build capacity among religious-community leaders for local engagement. The workshop brought together 21 religious and community leaders from France, Belgium, Morocco, and Tunisia, extending across ideological and political divides. These leaders possess significant social capital, grassroots knowledge, and local outreach to effectively discredit, and prevent the spread of, extremist ideology.

In this workshop, the presentations and discussions centered around the following themes: a) deconstruction of Daesh’s shifting communication strategies in light of its recent territorial loss; b) identification of a sustainable, consistent, and strategic response to the rise of islamophobia and fear of religiosity; c) the challenges of navigating complex media landscapes and the power of storytelling; d) building intra-Muslim cohesion, forging intersectional alliances, and developing strategic political tools against all extremisms. The participants also presented updates focusing on the successes, failures, challenges, and prospects of their local project implementation. The sense of trust, mutual collaboration, and collective responsibility developed among participants during the first two workshops was further strengthened. Lastly, the workshop emphasized the importance of intersectional<sup>1</sup> and intercommunity approach as an

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<sup>1</sup> Intersectionality is defined as overlapping and intersecting social identities as they apply to systems of domination and discrimination. The intersectional approach, therefore, means an inclusive framework, with members collaborating from across sociocultural, economic, and political divides, to combating all forms oppressive institutions to achieve greater equality and social justice for all people. For a general understanding on intersectionality, please see: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?utm\\_term=.42750e509b16](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?utm_term=.42750e509b16)

indispensable ingredient for a pragmatic and long-term solution to all forms of violent extremism.

### **Daesh Loss of Territory: Challenges and Opportunities**

TCC expert and Associate Director, Dr. Houda Abadi, opened the workshop presenting on the evolution of Daesh recruitment propaganda in response to its recent territorial losses. Dr. Abadi emphasized that Daesh's loss of ground is not in any way indicative of its overall decline. Although having territorial authority is fundamental to its existence as a physical state, Daesh's ideological influence extends far beyond the contours of the land it controls. As one participant from Morocco highlighted, "Daesh might be losing its territory, but it is not losing its cause." Participants agreed that military approach alone is not a far-sighted strategy to eradicate deep-rooted violent extremism and prevent its recurrence in the future. A military defeat cannot be expected, on its own, to halt the proliferation and resonance of Daesh's perverted accounts of Islamic history and theology, engineered meticulously to incite fear and hatred and, in the process, recruit fighters. On the contrary, Daesh's ability to successfully maintain a "state" for over two years is likely to serve as a driving motivation for it to begin restructuring and remobilizing as soon as it loses the territorial battle.

Referring to Daesh's recent print and video communications, Dr. Abadi showed that Daesh has started to repurpose its recruitment and outreach efforts from a theological, strategic, and tactical point of view. Upon watching and analyzing recent propaganda videos, participants observed the shift in Daesh's rhetoric. As one participant stated, "Daesh as a political movement seems to be struggling hierarchically. It is therefore using hadiths and Quranic verses, and recontextualizing them to adjust its narratives to account for its losses." However, participants argued that the loss of territory does not mean that Daesh will minimize or stop recruiting. In contrast, given its new political-territorial reality, Daesh will attempt to recruit even more aggressively. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and each community must utilize its local resources and knowledge to successfully combat the Daesh threat as it unfolds. This is because Daesh's appeals are hyperlocal – not only does Daesh capitalize on the specific grievances of its target audience, it disguises its messages under locally-relevant vocabulary, local humor, and other cultural codes that make the messages more relatable and easily fathomable. Dr. Abadi reminded the participants that community and religious leaders have so far almost exclusively focused on rational appeals in their counter messages. Missing is an effort to respond, in like manner, to the strong cognitive, emotional, and behavioral appeals that Daesh is able to generate. Additional prevention measures are required that go beyond textual approach, and incorporate visual and audio approaches. Finally, Dr. Abadi reiterated that Daesh's recruitment strategy is not just limited to the online sphere. Daesh methodically exploits its numerous offline, relational networks in marginalized and impoverished communities to recruit through human connections. It is, thus, essential to understand how offline and online networks interact with and complement each other.

The session concluded with an emphasis on the fact that Daesh reaches beyond its physical boundaries. It is an ideology that feeds off a variety of socio-political and historical grievances. Unless root-causes of extremism are addressed, a viable, long-term solution is difficult to

achieve, and military intervention alone could, in such circumstances, become part of the problem. Despite losing territory, Daesh will continue to recruit in new and innovative ways. Effective response to this increasing threat requires a flexible and comprehensive counter-messaging methodology, and an intersectional, community-based prevention strategy that targets local grievances, offers inclusionary and empowering alternatives, and fosters intra- and intercommunity relationships.

### **The Rise of Islamophobia and Fear of Religiosity**

Islamophobia, the hatred of and prejudice against Muslims purely because of their religious affiliation, is a widespread phenomenon in the western world. Expert, Mr. Arsalan Ifthikhar, international human rights lawyer and author of *Scapegoats: How Islamophobia Helps Our Enemies and Threatens Our Freedoms*, spoke to the participants about the origins and development of Islamophobia in the West, what its rise means for extremist groups like Daesh, and how it can be countered.

Mr. Ifthikhar stressed that Islamophobia is not just an arbitrary and uninformed fear of Muslims that emerged as a result of terrorist attacks associated with Islam. It is, in large part, the function of an anti-Muslim industry, funded and sustained by far-right, ultra-nationalist groups, particularly in the United States. Citing a 2011 report by the Center for American Progress called *Fear Inc.*, Mr. Ifthikhar showed that in the seven years prior to the writing of the report, five anti-Muslim activists received \$42 million to expand their mission of anti-Muslim xenophobia across the United States and Europe<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of this movement is to dehumanize Muslims, encourage prejudice against them, and delegitimize the faith of Islam as an inherently violent political ideology. As a result of an ill-informed audience which is reluctant to engage in dialogue with Muslims, these myths become deeply embedded in the general public opinion, and, in some cases, even translate into legislative Islamophobia, such as the anti-Sharia legislation in over 30 states in the US, the 2004 French hijab ban, and the 2009 anti-minaret referendum in Switzerland.

Participants agreed with Mr. Ifthikhar that the rise of Islamophobia and the existence of Daesh are deeply intertwined. As one participant commented, “Islamophobia and Daesh are two sides of the same coin.” Islamophobia, and ensuing discrimination against Muslims, serves as a recruitment tool for Daesh. It plays into Daesh’s predominant narrative of the humiliation of the Ummah in the west and directly feeds the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy that the Daesh frequently espouses. Daesh claims that it was only a matter of time before the West turned its back against Muslims. Therefore, the ideal destination for Muslims, where they could live with dignity and are not discriminated against based on their faith, is under the protection of the “caliphate.” In addition to its ideological consequences of normalizing discrimination against Muslims and emboldening far-right extremist forces, systematic and institutionalized Islamophobia further alienates marginalized Muslims, making them more susceptible to being exploited by Daesh and its utopian ideals of an “Islamic state.” Participants and experts concluded that any substantive strategy to prevent Daesh recruitment must include efforts to counter all forms of extremism and injustice.

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<sup>2</sup> To view full report, please visit: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/reports/2011/08/26/10165/fear-inc/>

Participants added nuance to the discussion by highlighting that Islamophobia is not just a western phenomenon. Islamophobia, in the form of fear of religiosity, is quite prevalent in Muslim societies as well. As one participant explained, “we need to reconsider the concept of Islamophobia and redefine it with respect to the recent developments taking place in Muslim-majority countries in terms of hostility towards conservative forms of Islam.” In many Muslim countries, secular groups as well as state-operated security apparatuses tend to equate religiosity with extremism. According to this understanding, the expression of religiosity is directly proportional to one’s tendency to adopt extremist ideology and practices. Socially, more visibly religious individuals run the risk of being ostracized, whereas, politically, overt religiosity could be criminalized. Participants discussed the recent ban on the production and sales of *Burqa* (face veil) in Morocco. According to them, criminalization of religious expression by the state alienates certain individuals and groups, who then find a perfect alternative in Daesh, which falsely promises to offer a system of law and order based on deeply religious values. This discussion led to the consensus that in order to effectively counter recruitment by Daesh, Muslim-majority countries have to create a conducive environment where all citizens feel a sense of belonging and all non-violent, rights-based forms of religious expression are accepted and tolerated.

In the end, Mr. Ifthikhar advised the participants that countering Islamophobia will require an active approach from Muslims across ideological and political divides. Muslims should not internalize the notion of victimhood and become passive instruments. To combat Islamophobia, it is important for Muslims not to isolate their struggles from that of other oppressed communities. Muslim representatives must stand in solidarity with all causes of social justice, human rights, and equality. Lastly, participants acknowledged that Muslims have to humanize and normalize their existence in the society by telling their own stories through different media outlets. Islamophobia can only be defeated when Muslims reclaim their narratives and become the primary voice for the mainstream discourses on Islam and Muslims.

### **Navigating Complex Media Landscapes and Power of Participatory Media**

To counter both Daesh and Islamophobia, religious leaders have a vital role to play in the online sphere. The workshop highlighted an urgent need for Muslim leaders to shift their roles from being passive consumers of media to become active producers of their own stories. The goal is to demystify concepts surrounding Islam and Muslims that are often misrepresented in mainstream media. One of the experts, Mr. Ifthikhar, asserted that conventional media focuses on Muslims on mainly two occasions, either in the context of terrorism or religion. Muslim representation in media has to be diversified to reflect the variety of human stories and social experiences of the global Muslim community. These narratives have the potential to show that Muslims are just like other human beings with similar characteristics, aspirations, and flaws.

Media expert, Ms. Slma Shelbayah, CNN Digital Producer and Communications Consultant, offered insight into the complexity of current media landscapes and the ways in which community and religious representatives could competently utilize these outlets to get their message across. Ms. Shelbayah discussed the process behind story selection and provided recommendations on how to prepare a newsworthy pitch. It was acknowledged that for the purposes of compelling storytelling, Muslims have to think outside of the box of victimhood.

Their stories should offer a new perspective and a creative angle to understanding difficult, unfamiliar ideas. Stories that are relevant, authentic, and unique are highly likely to catch the attention of producers/editors. For stories to have large-scale impact, potential contributors should analyze their target audience and choose a media outlet that specifically caters to the intended audience. Participants also explored the challenges and opportunities associated with using social media as a platform to circulate their stories. After learning the basic skills and acumen needed to interact with different media spaces, participants brainstormed, developed, edited, and pitched their own stories. The appeal and quality of their narratives reflected a strong grasp of the concept and process of storytelling. Participants viewed and assessed each other's work, and workshop experts provided technical feedback.

In addition to traditional media outlets, Mr. Iftikhar and Dr. Abadi co-led a session on Radical Alternative media. Contrary to the mainstream media which can be controlled by corporate interests and state-imposed restrictions, alternative media has the ability to challenge hegemonic policies and established institutional practices. Alternative media is a form of independent, non-profit, and participatory media that can disrupt entrenched systems of political power. New information technologies (such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp) can bypass medium of physical space for building active networks, and influence contents and practices of mainstream media. As a tool, alternative media has the ability to engage various publics and raise social consciousness from a grassroots approach. Participants recognized that Islamic interconnectivity on the internet has significant implication for the ways in which interpretations and decisions are made. Dr. Abadi stressed that for alternative media to work effectively, online efforts have to be supplemented with offline organization, mobilization, and political participation. Lastly, participants agreed that more Muslim voices were needed in the media.

### **Intersectional Solidarity and Political Strategies for Action**

Expert, Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, President of the World for All Foundation and former South African Ambassador to the United States, brought the participants' attention to the clash of extremisms that the global *Ummah* (Muslim community) is confronting today. He reasoned that the *Ummah* is caught between two extremisms – internal extremism, in the form of Daesh, and external extremism, in the form of radical nationalist supremacy groups. In order to fight this rising tide of extremisms, religious and community leaders will have to develop strategic political tools and engage actively in civil society. Muslims can no longer confine themselves to the fringes of society and stay silent. Ambassador Rasool highlighted that while Muslims are good at committing to principles and determining tactics, they lack at developing strategies that cut across ideological and political fault-lines. Participants agreed that to fight effectively all forms of extremism, Muslims will have to unify amongst themselves, understand their rights and duties as citizens, and strike partnerships with other social and political groups that promote peaceful coexistence. The strategy is to focus and build on the commonalities that Muslims share with their natural allies, and overcome any differences that might weaken the collective goal. Muslim leaders should not wait to be approached; rather, they should respond proactively when they see injustice happening to other marginalized groups. Recognizing the importance of a shared struggle will lead to lasting solutions for preventing all forms of extremism and injustice.

### **Local Project Implementation**

In their local communities, each workshop participant is engaged in planning and implementing projects designed to prevent violent extremism. Overall, twenty-three participants are engaged in 59 total projects in four different countries. Figure 1 illustrates the number of projects being implemented by country; figure 2 identifies the 59 projects by category:

Figure 1: Participant Projects by Country

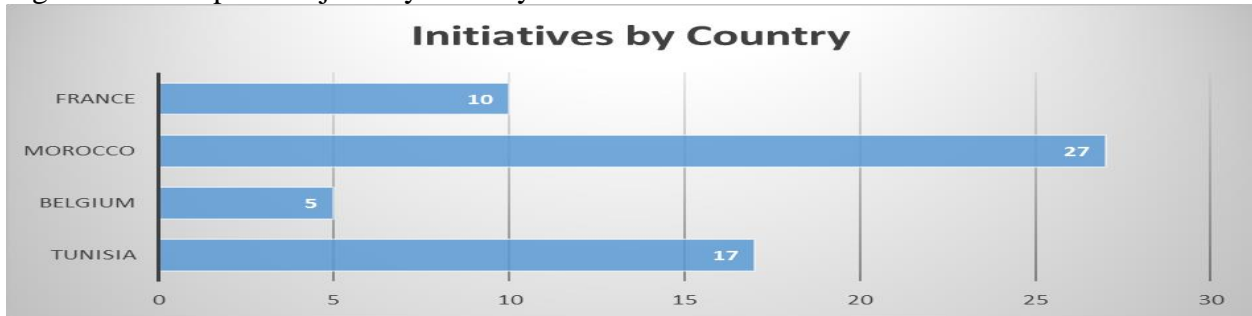
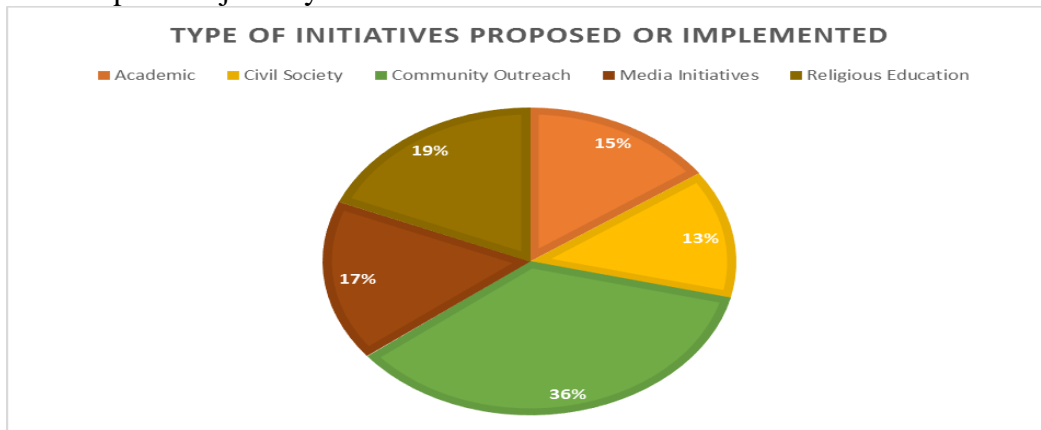


Figure 2: Participant Projects by Classification



On the final day of the workshop, the participants presented detailed country reports highlighting the successes and challenges of their local initiatives and the strategies and opportunities for the future.

***Tunisia***

Tunisian participants have engaged in a variety of projects both on- and off-line. They are collaborating with different civil society organizations, such as Families Against Terrorism and Extremism and International Rabat Organization, to arrange workshops aimed at recovering groups, especially youth and women, exposed to violent ideology. To prevent the radicalization of its younger generation, the Tunisian group has initiated religious literacy programs that address misinterpretations of the sacred Islamic texts. In terms of media involvement, the Tunisian participants have conducted radio programs, published magazine articles, and issued online sermons that deconstruct Daesh’s virulent agenda, reveals the inconsistencies in its propaganda, and offers empowering alternatives. The Tunisian team has also collaborated with government agencies to address some of the structural problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of social justice, that constitute push factors for terrorism. One of the

participants researched profiles of 1000 young Tunisians currently in Daesh and published a report analyzing different personal, social, and religious persuasions that inspired their participation.

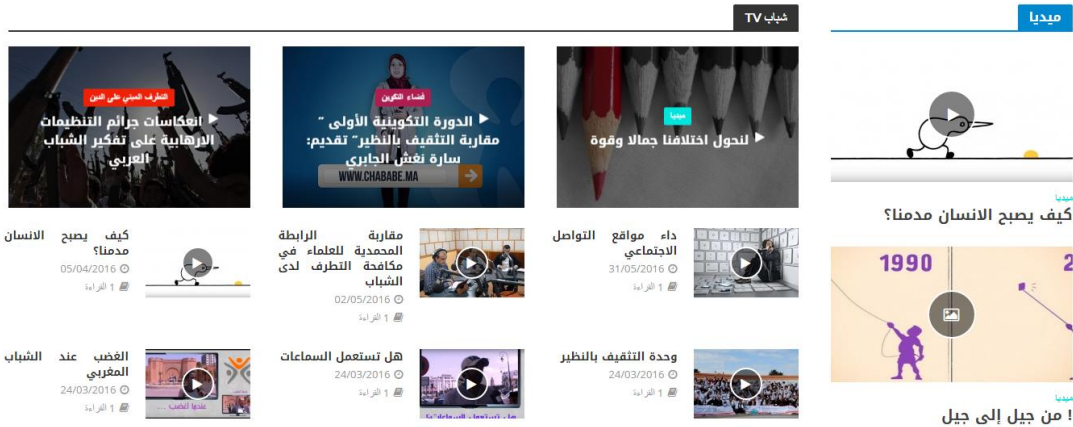
The overall strategy of the Tunisian participants is to work across different sectors of society, engage with national and foreign actors, and establish trust and credibility within their communities to promote substantive change. Their primary target audiences are women, youth, and returnees. While each participant has their own expertise, and has formerly worked independently, this workshop series motivated them to collaborate with each other on different local initiatives in Tunisia. Assessing the impact of the workshops, one Tunisian Imam said: “the insights of the workshops’ into Daesh’s recruitment narratives have enhanced our response to its propaganda; therefore, weekly meetings are being held with Tunisia’s national press syndicate members to coordinate our coverage of Daesh-related stories.” Participants confronted the challenges of being able to discuss terrorism without falling in the trap of Daesh propaganda and resistance from civil society groups that oppose returnees and portray them as a threat.

### *Morocco*

Since the previous workshop, Moroccan participants have expanded their outreach and counter-messaging efforts. Their strategy is to focus on removing misconceptions about Islam and creating an intellectual elite, or *Ulema*, who can produce and circulate a tolerant understanding of the religious tenets. Moroccan participants have been forming alliances with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, official religious institutions, domestic and international NGOs, and various media platforms. Their main target audience is women and youth that are vulnerable to Daesh indoctrination. Recently, some of the Moroccan participants conducted a series of workshops to train young women who were found to be communicating with Daesh. A Moroccan Imam who is also the editor-in-chief of al Qubae online Magazine released a special issue dedicated solely to violent extremism.

The Moroccan group is particularly concerned about the increasing criminalization of religiosity in Morocco and an expansion of the security state, which feeds into Daesh’s rhetoric. To address this concern, the Moroccan participants met outside of the workshop setting on different occasions to discuss issues that pertained to religion and identity. Experts praised this initiative as an example of how networks established at the TCC workshops are being utilized locally to build coalitions across political and religious divides. To prevent youth from joining Daesh, one of the youth leaders from Morocco created guidebooks, conducted training seminars, and launched a website called [www.chababe.ma](http://www.chababe.ma). The participant further collaborated with prominent athletes and cinema centers to reach out to more young people in creative ways. He also invited all workshop colleagues to participate in a fully sponsored summer camp in Morocco, which will strengthen this newly created network and foster future collaboration between them.

Figure 3: Screenshot of the anti-extremism and youth empowerment website [chababe.ma](http://www.chababe.ma).



Finally, participants discussed their challenges, which entailed lack of financial resources, bureaucratic red tape, and an entrenched security approach to countering violent extremism. Participants ended on an optimistic note and seemed keen to overcome these obstacles upon their return through cooperative partnerships.

### France

The French participants have been involved in a range of activities since the previous workshop. They have published hi-tech counter-messaging videos, released online sermons, organized conferences debunking Daesh’s theological positions, and conducted mediation and reflection circles for the youth. These youth circles have been particularly helpful for youngsters who have struggled with reconciling their religious and national identities. One French Imam has authored a series of books that promote contextually-accurate understandings of Islam and encourages readers to become active agents in the fight against extremist groups like Daesh. Participants recognize that Islamophobia is another form of extremism that must be defeated to prevent already-disenfranchised Muslim youth from getting lured by Daesh appeals. For this reason, they are working with school authorities to combat discrimination against Muslim students in classrooms and to create academic environment that welcomes and accepts children of all background.

The biggest challenge that the French participants face is that of the security state. Muslim leaders and representatives in France are rarely acknowledged or supported by the government, making it difficult for them to coordinate with and bring change through official channels. This makes it tough for Muslims leaders to reclaim media space and have their voices heard. In response to these challenges, the strategic focus of French participants will be on forging meaningful alliances with civil society organizations, human rights groups, and other religious groups. According to the French participants, the opportunity for them lies in their ability to break the wall of silence and fear, make their work more visible, promote tolerance and coexistence, and stand up with other minority groups in a struggle for for justice and social change.



## **Belgium**

Participants from Belgium have been involved with various domestic and international human rights groups to combat extremism, in the form of Daesh as well as rising far-right, ultra-nationalism. They have partnered with organizations like AFD International and the European Organization for Co-existence and Human Rights to discuss deep-rooted causes of extremism and the ways to overcome them. On a more grassroots level, Belgian participants engaged with local imams in community mosques and arranged workshops for ordinary public to learn and ask questions about Islam. The Belgian participants appreciate the significance of intersectional cooperation. They marched for peace after the Brussels attack along with their fellow Belgian nationals, and initiated intercultural-interfaith dialogue across the city. As another creative project, Belgian participants mobilized their local Muslim communities, went to famous avenues in Brussels, and handed out to passersby roses and small cards with sayings of the Prophet promoting love, peace, and solidarity. Like French, Moroccan, and Tunisian participants, the Belgian participants have also invested great resources in projects for the youth. These projects consist of sport activities, excursions, and human-rights based religious lessons. Going forward, the participants see great opportunity in uniting with other Belgian Muslims on the issue of radicalization to keep their message homogenous and coherent. Finally, their strategic focus is on a rights-based approach to civic engagement and religious participation.

## **Conclusions**

The third Countering Daesh Recruitment Propaganda workshop built upon the first two workshops by enriching the sense of community and collective responsibility that developed among participants. The focus themes stimulated considerable discussion amongst participants, which was at times intense. However, participants, through such healthy and honest exchanges, were able to articulate a common vision. Based on topics discussed and participant feedback, future workshops will include sessions on women and child soldiers, intra-Muslim dialogue and coalition-building, and effective strategies for reintegration and rehabilitation of returnees. Towards the end of the workshop, participants pledged to initiate cross-country projects and organize annual meetings to discuss lessons learned from the field. These examples are a testament to the workshops' utility in forging mutually beneficial partnerships that go beyond the scope of the workshop and contribute to a collective struggle on a global scale. Participants will continue to report on their project development and implementation, and will benefit from interactive workshops with experts and peers that aids in the reach of their individual interventions.

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