

Dismantling Racism and Militarism in U.S. Foreign Policy

Pocantico Conference Report

January 5–7, 2023 • Pocantico Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund



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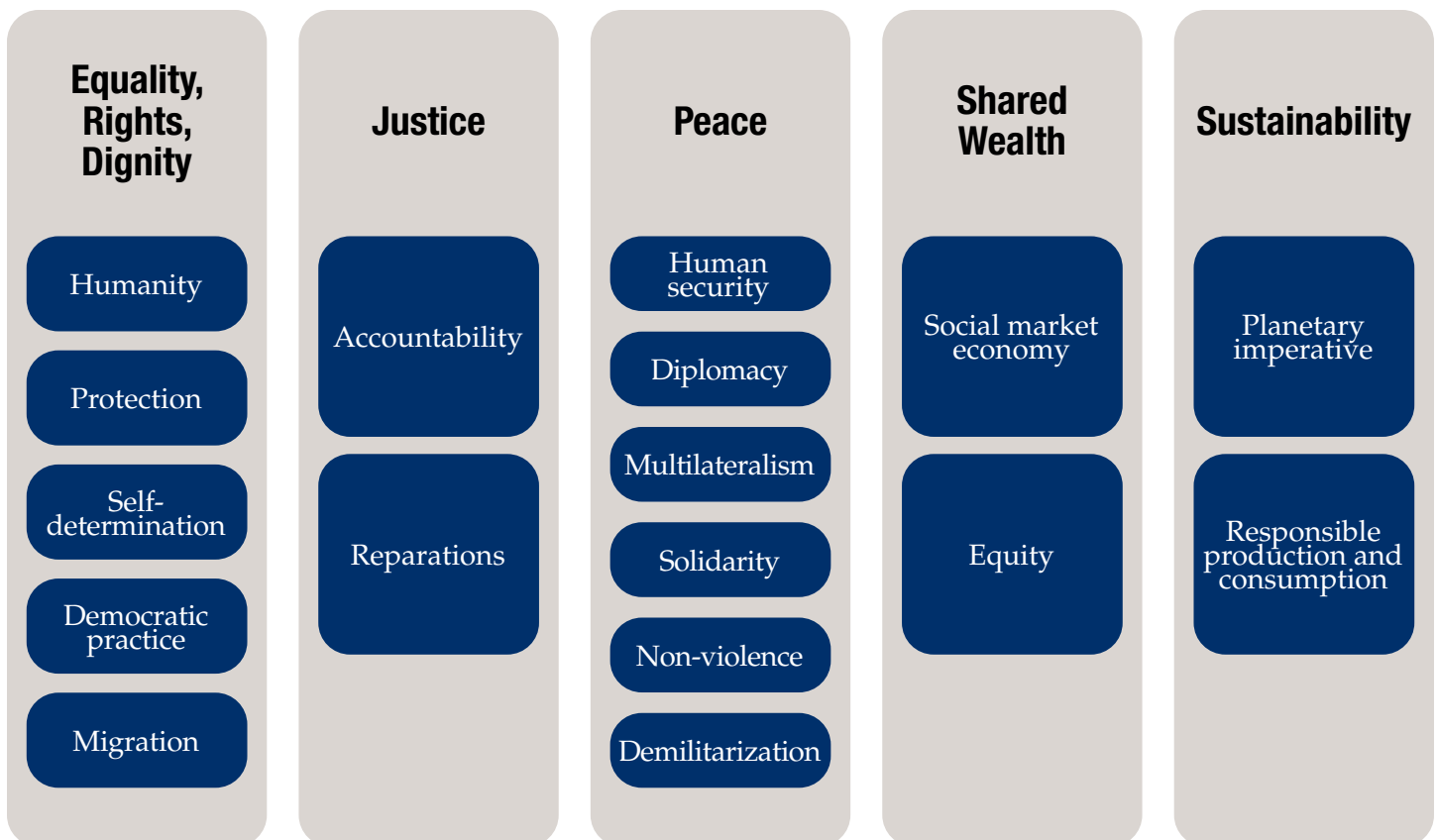
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The organizers and participants would like to thank the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Jubitz Family Foundation for making this gathering and important discussion possible. This summary report, prepared by conference rapporteur Hanna Homestead, represents the views and opinions of the Working Group.

Executive Summary

The 2023 Dismantling Racism and Militarism (DRM) in U.S. Foreign Policy conference was held from January 5-7, 2023 at the Pocantico Center in Tarrytown, New York. It was jointly organized by the Friends Committee on National Legislation Education Fund (FCNL EdFund) and the Center for International Policy (CIP). Diana Ohlbaum (she/her), Senior Strategist and Legislative Director at FCNL and Nancy Okail (she/her), President and CEO of CIP, co-led the three-day event, which was made possible with generous support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Jubitz Family Foundation.

The DRM Pocantico conference was a reconvening of the Dismantling Racism and Militarism in U.S. Foreign Policy working group, which met bi-weekly between November 2020 and April 2021. These discussions culminated in a discussion paper published by the working group co-chairs, Salih Booker and Diana Ohlbaum, which defined the belief systems, economic structures, and political institutions underpinning the perpetuation of militarism and racism within the United States. The paper offered a compelling alternative vision of U.S. global engagement based on the following five principles:



Building on this foundation, the Pocantico conference brought original and new members of the working group together to carry this important work forward. The gathering totaled 23 people, including the two organizers, three facilitators, and 18 individual participants representing 14 organizations spanning advocacy, grassroots organizing, philanthropy, research, and faith-based social justice work.

Participants came from a variety of backgrounds and locations and ranged from recent university graduates to experts with decades of professional experience. These included prominent scholars and specialists on a wide range of issue-areas, including feminist peacebuilding, economic inequality, public advocacy, climate change, and the military-industrial complex.

The conference presented a unique opportunity for a diverse group of committed professionals to unpack the issues of racism and militarism and their intersections in both U.S. foreign and domestic policy—an understudied, overlapping field with enormous implications for global human and ecological well-being.

Through plenary discussions, breakout group exercises, and mealtime conversations, the gathering provided an invaluable space to learn about our intersecting work, identify common challenges and solutions, and forge new partnerships and mechanisms to streamline and strengthen our collective efforts moving forward. The conference was an important first step to filling a critical gap in communication and collaboration within domestic and foreign peace and social justice organizing and advocacy.

As a seasoned foreign policy professional remarked, noting the exceptional diversity of the participants, “In all my years working on these issues, I have never been in a room like this.”

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Organizations represented at the Pocantico DRM Conference

- » Center for International Policy (CIP)
- » Chisholm Legacy Project
- » Congressional Progressive Caucus Center (CPCC)
- » Detention Watch Network (DWN)
- » Ford Foundation
- » Friends Committee on National Legislation Education Fund (FCNL EdFund)
- » Institute for Policy Studies
- » Justice Is Global
- » Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice
- » MADRE
- » Peace Direct
- » Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF)
- » Sojourners
- » War Prevention Initiative

Conference Goals

The purposes of the DRM conference were to analyze the changes in the political ecosystem since the original working group concluded its discussions in April 2021, review the status of efforts to dismantle systems upholding racism and militarism, and explore ways that organizations within the movement can continue to build and share knowledge moving forward.

The Pocantico conference discussions were framed around three main objectives:



A key question pervading the weekend’s discussions was this: why have we made so little progress toward a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world? Despite the dedicated efforts of the participating organizations and individuals over many decades, racism and militarism remain deeply embedded in U.S. policies, domestic and foreign. The United States continues to enforce white supremacy through endless wars and endless Pentagon spending, police brutality, mass incarceration, border militarization, and nuclear blackmail.

At the same time, humanity is facing a catastrophic climate crisis, and millions of people around the world are unable to meet their basic needs. The triple evils of racism, militarism, and economic exploitation described by Dr. King¹ are very much alive and well.

¹ The triple evils were described in “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.
Sourced from: <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

Barriers to Progress

The group observed a number of overarching barriers to progress toward dismantling racism and militarism. In addition to (and partly because of) the economic, political, and ideological structures that underpin the status quo, individuals and organizations working to advance human rights and reorient national priorities to center human and ecological health both domestically and internationally are disconnected, uncoordinated, underfunded, and underdogs in the global fight for peace and justice.

Research and advocacy organizations are disconnected from each other, from global movements, from policymakers, and in some cases from the people they seek to serve. The various campaigns and movements, while facing similar political challenges, often operate in separate stovepipes without coordinated strategies or messages.

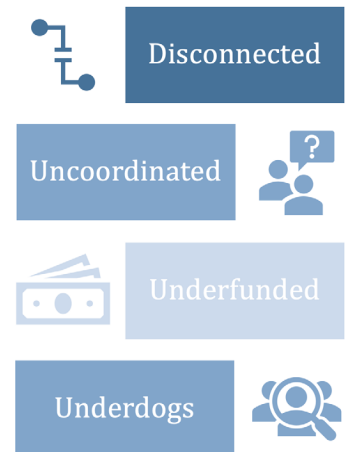
This results in less effective outcomes and additional challenges, as the disjointed presentation of these issues means that average Americans do not understand how foreign affairs impact their daily lives, and vice versa. Progressive organizations in general, and grassroots advocacy groups in particular, also have trouble finding funders who will commit to long-term institution building rather than short-term project support. Last, organizations within this movement are underdogs because they are seeking to peacefully deconstruct a system that serves the powerful, status quo interests.

Groups that are led by persons of color and represent marginalized communities face disproportionate risks and burdens from systemic racism, including political exclusion; physical threats, intimidation, and violence; financial discrimination and underfunding; and increased exposure to health and environmental hazards.

Action for Change

Based on these gaps and impediments, the group identified a number of key opportunities for collaboration across geographical distance and issue-areas, on both short- and long-term goals. These can be condensed into four categories:

1. connect and coordinate activities and approaches;
2. establish an inclusive, transnational, intersectional, and interdisciplinary pro-peace framework;



3. apply for joint funding and work with funders to provide longer-term institutional support; and
4. balance urgency with care and compassion.

Connect and coordinate activities and approaches.

Members of this working group understand the multitude of collective challenges the movement to dismantle racism and militarism is facing. We also broadly agree on the solutions needed to achieve the shared goal of a more peaceful and just world.

However, organizations focusing on differing aspects of interrelated problems—such as climate change, migration, conflict, and voting rights—are not in touch with each other and are largely unaware of the cross-cutting research, advocacy, and initiatives others are working on. In addition, in general, organizations working closest to populations most impacted by racism and militarism are not connected to policymakers, funders, and other advocates who are better positioned to enact systemic changes.

The result of being disconnected and uncoordinated is that we miss opportunities for synergy and enhancing impactful work. We also fail to build effective mechanisms for accountability.

There is an urgent need to connect organizations vertically and horizontally to utilize our unique strengths strategically, ensure efforts on all levels are informed and driven by the needs of populations most impacted by racism and militarism, and share and scale up strategies that effectively disrupt and reorient the harmful belief systems, economic structures, and political institutions that perpetuate violence and inequality.

Establish an inclusive, transnational, intersectional, and interdisciplinary pro-peace framework based on a shared theoretical analysis and shared values, including the need to access resources equitably on a global basis.

Movement-building is not only about practical work. It requires developing a theoretical framework of ideas and values that serve as a foundation for the paradigm shift we are collectively working towards. As a participant pointed out, in addition to our individual activities, “What is our contribution to coordination and convergence in the big ‘we’?”

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Currently, the movement to dismantle racism and militarism is lacking a coordinated and resourced convening space to build and support diverse thought-leaders of today. By contrast, those advocating for increasing militarization and policies that create inequitable racial outcomes are well-resourced and highly institutionalized after many decades of intentional movement-building from the ground up.

They have used their years of deep organizing to build a distorted but unifying narrative that legitimize policies rooted in white supremacy, U.S. exceptionalism, patriarchy, white Christian nationalism, and the glorification of violence.

We know that people are motivated by values, not facts alone. In order to convince the broader public that the current path our nation is pursuing is immoral, undesirable, and unsustainable, and that there are viable alternatives, we must appeal to shared values and lived experience.

Developing and amplifying a coherent, coordinated, and consistent message while recognizing and respecting the different perspectives and needs of our diverse coalition members is a difficult task, made even more challenging by mainstream resistance to centering and amplifying voices of those most directly affected by the issues we focus on.

All of these efforts require time and spaces to convene, build relationships, establish buy-in, and collaboratively build our vision and movement.

Jointly apply for larger grants and work with funders to secure longer-term, institutional support.

Funders play an essential role in making all aspects of our movement work possible: convening, research, advocacy, and organizing. While individual short-term project funding is greatly appreciated and enables funders to more easily ensure recipient accountability, organizations fighting powerful interests to change the status quo would greatly benefit from longer-term, institutional support.

Short-term projects are an important but singular aspect of the mosaic of activities involved in this work. In addition to implementing projects, organizers and advocates are also often managing threats to their own survival and safety, and that of their families and communities, posed by racism and militarism.

The burden of having to survive these systems of oppression while also fighting to abolish them is not insignificant, and the insecurity of not knowing if the next phase of a program or broader strategy will be funded greatly impairs planning processes and is a drain on already-limited bandwidth.

Longer-term institutional support would help alleviate some of these pressures and allow organizations and individuals working to dismantle racism and militarism to devote more time and energy to collaborating, compensating grassroots advocates for their crucial expertise, and developing and implementing impactful, creative ways to build a more effective movement.

Balance urgency with care and compassion.

Time is not on our side; we do not have the luxury of inaction or failure. At the same time, we must care for ourselves and each other's wellbeing to be able to sustain our collaborative partnerships and professional activities.

Therefore, important tasks are to invest in both long-term strategies and achieve and capitalize on short-term wins to maintain hope and faith in our interconnected movements. We must undertake our efforts strategically and responsibly by taking advantage of timely opportunities, celebrating small wins, and being relentless in our pursuit of peace and justice while simultaneously integrating mechanisms for care and rest to avoid burnout.

Enabling Factors

Despite these daunting challenges, there are a number of enabling factors on our side that give us hope. We have a new generation of activists and influencers who are not afraid to ask difficult questions and tackle the big issues. We have seen the success of past progressive movements, and have the privilege of building on the work of earlier organizers and theorists to strengthen and expand the modern movement today.

Throughout this country and communities across the world, systems of mutual aid and grassroots advocacy are pushing back against exploitation and inequality, and we have the opportunity to support and build the movement in solidarity with these efforts.

The very existence of our working group demonstrates that re-orienting military spending towards equitable, people-centered policies resonates with broad and diverse sectors of society.

What others attempt to weaponize is actually our greatest strength; as one participant stated, “Our power is in our diversity.” There is untapped potential within our vast networks of thinkers, leaders, advocates, organizers, policymakers, workers, caregivers, and grassroots networks—where true power lies.

Last, we know that success is possible. Paradigm change comes when the current system loses legitimacy in the eyes of the majority, and it is clear that only a privileged few are being served by the current system. The majority of the American public does not support endless wars and excessive levels of Pentagon spending.

One-third of voters in the United States are poor and low-income people earning less than \$50,000 in annual household income. Working together, we have the potential to mobilize; reject militarism; and promote global peace, justice, health, and equity.

Outcomes

Overall, participants considered the Pocantico conference to be a successful convening. They appreciated the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals and organizations and felt energized by the dynamism of the group. During the course of the conference, participants identified opportunities for future collaboration and built consensus for continuing this cross-disciplinary, intersectional work. Within one week of the conference, multiple external organizations reached out to the organizers, expressing a desire to be part of the working group and future efforts.

Recognizing the need and strong desire to continue convening and collaborating, CIP committed to carry on the initiative through monthly meetings. The goals of these monthly meetings are these:

1. to learn from people experiencing the impact of racism and militarism first-hand;
2. to continue to identify common challenges and opportunities;
3. to identify priority areas and specific roles to be taken on by various group members; and

**"Our power
is in our
diversity"**

4. to use these conversations to inform a forthcoming CIP podcast dedicated to highlighting the intersection of domestic concerns and foreign policy. The funders present also agreed to work to reduce silos in funding streams and scale up support for longer-term funding.

While there remains much work to do in terms of developing and operationalizing specific projects, campaigns, and ongoing collaboration, the initial structure has been established to help sustain this critical work.

The overwhelmingly positive reception illustrates not only a strong interest among groups that had not previously worked together to do so in the future, but also the need to invest more in supporting further convening and coordinating initiatives. It is a true privilege to be a part of these efforts, and we appreciate and look forward to continuing this work together.

