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Reclaiming Our Wellbeing: Conversations
Rooted in Context, Care, and Collective Power



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #1:
Mapping Our Wellbeing Landscapes



Wellbeing isn't luxury or afterthought. It's political infrastructure.

When movements treat wellbeing as a foundational strategy – investing in emotional literacy, building collective support, creating culturally-appropriate care infrastructure – they become more effective, sustainable, powerful.



That was the core insight from the first session of Vuka Coalition's Wellbeing Dialogue Series. The evidence came not from theory, but from lived experience from people who've learned the hard way: **movements that don't care for their people don't last.**

Three provocations emerged:

1

Can you fight for justice whilst destroying yourself?

The sacrifice culture is real, systemic, and unsustainable. Activists are traumatised into silence, organisations lose their best people to burnout, movements fracture under pressure they were never equipped to handle.

2

What if emotional literacy is political power?

In Colombia, teaching children to name their feelings created a 53% drop in school conflicts – and a generation of youth councillors and community leaders. Soft skills are hard infrastructure.

3

Who defines wellbeing – and for whom?

Kenyan activists described wellbeing as communal, rooted in togetherness. Dutch participants spoke of individual balance. Capitalist wellness culture sells products. These aren't just different definitions, they're different realities that shape who gets support and what kind.

What follows are two stories shared in the session that illustrate these provocations in practice. One from Colombia, building emotional literacy from childhood. One from the global trenches, supporting activists under constant threat.

Together, they reveal a fundamental truth: **wellbeing is culturally constructed, politically charged, and strategically essential.** They also reveal what's missing from mainstream wellness discourse – indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual practices, and collective approaches to healing that have sustained resistance for centuries. That's where the next session begins.



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You Can't Manage What You Can't Name

Fundación Latir works in communities shaped by decades of conflict in Colombia. Their insight is deceptively simple: most children don't have the language to describe what they're feeling.

Ask a child how they feel. They say "fine." Not because they are, but because they literally don't have words for "anxious" or "frustrated" or "overwhelmed."

The problem isn't just linguistic. It's systemic:

Children learn silence early. "Boys don't cry." "You look prettier when you smile." By adolescence, they've internalised that feelings are dangerous, vulnerability is weakness.

Teachers can't model what they don't have. **Parents** struggle with their own emotional regulation. How do you guide someone through territory you've never learned to navigate?

High-pressure environments leave no space. Academic demands, family complexity, contextual violence. When you're surviving, emotional processing is a luxury.

The cycle reproduces itself. Adults who never learned emotional literacy raise children who suppress feelings, who become adults without tools, who raise the next generation the same way.

Breaking the Cycle

work with adults first, give children vocabulary, turn art into emotional language

Picture a teacher mid-frustration. Instead of suppressing or exploding, they say: "I'm feeling frustrated because we've covered this several times and I'm not sure everyone's following. I'm going to breathe and try a different approach."

That moment teaches more than curriculum. It shows that adults have feelings, that naming them is okay, that there are productive ways to work with difficult emotions.

- **The tools:** Emotional lexicon cards that help young people distinguish feelings. Not to eliminate "negative" emotions, to help a child move from "I'm bad" to "I feel anxious." That precision matters. It's the difference between identity and temporary state. **Assertive feedback cards teach communication – how to express needs clearly, give and receive feedback without defensiveness.**
- **Art and play as language:** Teenagers acted out community conflict as TV news. One anchored, one filmed, someone held teleprompter cards. Creative, engaging – and teaching conflict management, teamwork, communication, public speaking, critical thinking.



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The Results

53% reduction in
school conflicts

Not minor playground disputes – serious issues like verbal aggression, physical fights, weapons brought to school, substance abuse.

Young people becoming youth councillors, community leaders, programme staff. **Emotional literacy translating to civic capacity.**

The ripple: these young people take vocabulary home. They influence families, friends, social relationships. Cultural change is generational. This work is planting seeds.

Colombia's 2024 Law 2383 made socio-emotional education essential to the national system. Not enrichment. Essential. Rights and obligations. It's a beautiful law, practitioners say. But laws need implementation. That's where work begins.

The Global Picture:

When Repression Traumatizes Into Silence

Open Briefing has supported activists globally for 14 years. Their work spans physical security, digital resilience, collective wellbeing – the last deliberately expansive. Mental, emotional, physical, financial, digital, spiritual, social, ecological health.

For activists, wellbeing isn't "are you happy?" It's holistic assessment connecting individual health to community strength, organisational sustainability, movement resilience.

What Makes Support So Hard

- **The sacrifice culture.** Activists view work as requiring total self-abnegation. The greater good demands everything. Personal needs feel like betrayal. This isn't noble, it's unsustainable. It leads to burnout, breakdown, movements losing committed people when needed most.
- **Stigma and guilt.** Reluctance to seek help, especially when support feels foreign or culturally inappropriate. Even when support exists, activists won't access it. Asking feels like admitting weakness. Taking time to rest, process trauma, address mental health – necessities treated as luxuries.
- **Generic solutions fail.** Meditation apps, individual counselling, wellness retreats don't address specific pressures. They're designed for stressed professionals, not people navigating state repression, constant surveillance, systemic criminalisation.



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Cross-Regional Learning: What Emerged

When these two perspectives came together in dialogue, participants surfaced insights that cut across contexts. Four themes emerged:

1

Wellbeing Is Culturally Constructed

How we define wellbeing shapes everything – who seeks support, what help feels appropriate, whether interventions work.

2

Digital Activists Face Unique Pressures

Constant connectivity, relentless exposure to threats, surveillance anxiety, and coordinated cyber bullying create an emotional toll that accumulates invisibly – digital hygiene isn't optional, it's survival.

3

The "Nun Mentality" Is Widespread

Even non-religious activists adopt the framework that dedication requires bypassing personal needs entirely – but movements lose people to preventable burnout when no one cares for the carers.

4

Soft Skills Are Hard Infrastructure

Socio-emotional skills – communication, emotional literacy, conflict resolution, empathy – determine whether movements sustain through prolonged struggle, whether coalitions hold under stress, whether organisations adapt rather than fracture.

This Leads to Our Next Dialogue Session

On 28 October (12:00–13:30 EAT), we'll explore what decolonised wellbeing truly means, moving beyond dominant frameworks to embrace indigenous, spiritual, and collective approaches to healing and resilience. Together, we'll reflect on how context, care, and community power can shape transformative wellbeing practices rooted in justice.



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