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



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #3:
Wellbeing as a political practice

How caring for ourselves and each other becomes an act of resistance – and the infrastructure that keeps movements alive

Have you ever thought about running a 200-kilometre race? What if we told you that you kinda already are?

The fight for justice is not completable in a single lifetime. It is an intergenerational ultramarathon – and the movements that make it to the finish line are the ones that have learned to truly care for themselves and each other, making wellbeing a political practice in itself.

In the final session of Vuka Coalition's Wellbeing Dialogue Series, activists, psychosocial practitioners, and movement builders from Thailand and the Philippines gathered to reflect on a fundamental question: **what does care actually look like when movements are under pressure?**

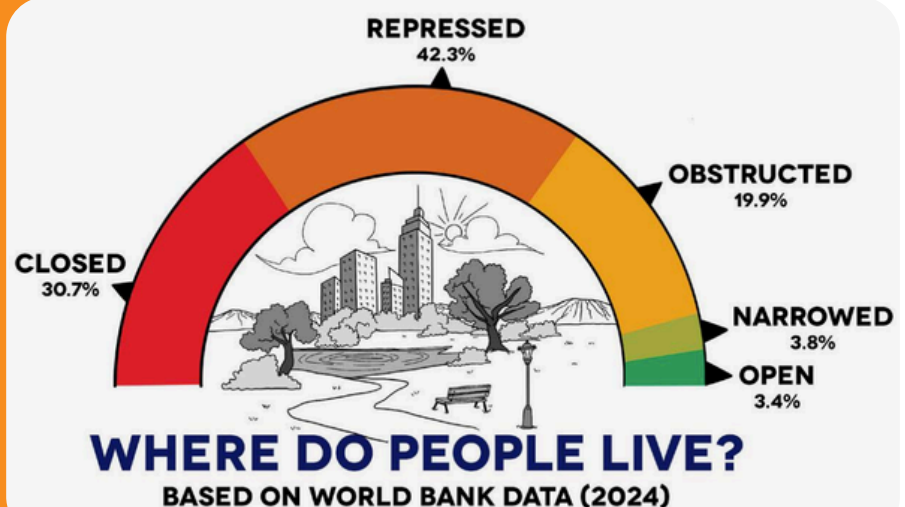
The World Activists Are Navigating

To understand why wellbeing is political, we first have to understand the landscape activists are operating in.

Reylynne de la Paz, CIVICUS Advocacy and Campaigns Manager, opened the session with findings from the People Power Under Attack report:

Only 7.2% of the world's population lives in countries with open or narrowed civic space.

That is 7.5 percentage points fewer than in 2024. The situation is worsening. **The vast majority of people on this planet organise, advocate, and demand accountability in environments designed to silence them.**



The violations documented by the CIVICUS Monitor describe the daily texture of risk for the activists:



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- Systematic detention of protesters, journalists, and human rights defenders;
- Physical attacks and excessive force against those demanding accountability;
- Restrictive laws – documented in at least 66 countries in 2025 –, including foreign agents laws designed to paralyse civil society organisations by branding them as foreign operatives;
- Digital repression: 10% of documented violations included an online component – internet shutdowns, social media blocks, surveillance;
- Transnational repression, red-tagging, and the criminalisation of activism through public smear campaigns and arbitrary detention.



The picture is consistent across regions. In Asia, Gen Z protesters and indigenous defenders face systematic detention and transnational repression. In Africa, 44 out of 50 countries are rated as obstructed, repressed, or closed. In the Americas, authorities are increasingly weaponising criminal law to label activists as criminals and enemies of the state.*¹

And yet, movements endure and people continue to organise. Which is why, as Reylynne argued, wellbeing is what makes the continuation possible.



Repressive leaders want us to lose the ability to hope. Wellbeing is a political practice – even an act of resistance.

– Reylynne de la Paz, CIVICUS



The Activist Marathon: Why Rest Is Strategy

That endurance has a cost is something Reylynne de la Paz knows in her bones – she is an ultramarathon runner who has completed a 200-kilometre race. She brought that experience into the room to reframe what endurance actually requires.

“When you run an ultramarathon, there are moments of excruciating pain – moments where you ask yourself why you allowed yourself to suffer. And what separates the runner who finishes – or survives – from the one who does not is not speed or strength. It is knowing when to stop.”



¹ For the full regional breakdown, see the People Power Under Attack report: civicsmonitor.contentfiles.net/media/documents/GlobalFindings2025.EN.pdf.



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Stopping mid-race – sometimes for minutes, sometimes entirely – is survival strategy, she explained. “I’d rather stop now and not finish this race than not be able to run at all.”



The same logic applies to movements. The fight for justice is an intergenerational ultramarathon – protracted, painful, and not completable within one lifetime. Rest is what makes the struggle sustainable. Without it, what awaits is permanent injury.



Nyachomba Kariuki-Schofield, who moderated the session, sharpened the political stakes: “What repressive systems want most is for us to lose hope – to believe that a better world isn’t possible. That’s why radical hope is its own form of resistance.”

When Self-Care Feels Like Betrayal

For activists around the world, a set of questions keeps surfacing – uncomfortable, persistent, and deeply familiar: Why should I focus on myself when communities are suffering right now? How can I rest when my comrade is overwhelmed? Doesn’t choosing myself mean abandoning the cause?

Carol, a mental health and psychosocial support provider working with ExileHub in Thailand – supporting Myanmar media professionals and activists in exile since the 2021 military coup – named this cultural tension directly. In many communities, she explained, self-care is seen as selfish. The idea of attending to your own needs while others are experiencing displacement, violence, and persecution can feel morally impossible.

But Carol offers a crucial reframe: **when suffering is caused by a political system, caring for your own wellbeing is already a political act, an act of resilience and resistance.**

Staying whole in a system designed to break you is defiance. The oppressor’s aim is your exhaustion, your despair, your silence. Your recovery is a refusal.

The Shift to Collective Care

Reframing self-care as resistance is a start. The deeper shift is understanding care as something that belongs to the collective – shared infrastructure that movements build together, woven into how they organise rather than squeezed in between crises.



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Decolonising Care: The Concept of Kapwa

Naro, a psychosocial provider with Keri, a collective of defenders and wellbeing weavers in the Philippines, introduced one of the most powerful frameworks in the dialogue: the Filipino indigenous concept of kapwa – a shared sense of identity and selfhood.

In this worldview, you are not born alone. You exist alongside others. Your identity, your pain, and your joy are woven inextricably into your community.

Seen through this lens, “How can I rest when my comrade is overwhelmed?” carries no contradiction. As Naro put it, asking that feels like asking your right arm to relax while your left arm is on fire – the separation simply makes no sense.

—— “ ——

Wellbeing feels like the embodiment of our politics. Can I get to experience liberation with my own comrades, right now, even if we are a long way from our destination?

— Naro, Keri

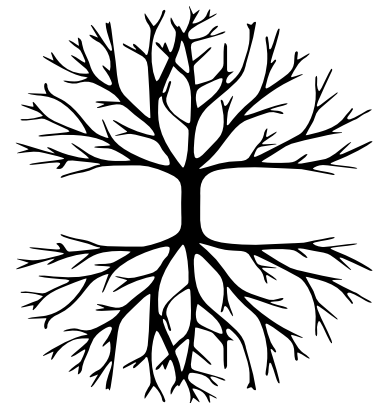
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The goal is to cultivate communities of care where no one is left to carry the weight alone – and where people can actually practise the just, liberated world they are fighting towards, in the present tense.

Returning to Indigenous Knowledge

Naro described the shift from individual to collective care as an act of epistemic justice – a return to indigenous knowledge systems that were never individualist to begin with.

For Filipino activists, this means returning to the language of care embedded in Tagalog, the most widely spoken indigenous language of the Philippines, and other Philippine languages – languages that already hold community and interconnection as foundational. For indigenous defenders, it means recognising that their wellbeing is inseparable from the land they protect.





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Choreographing Care

Collective care sounds beautiful in theory. The harder question is what it looks like when the bulldozers are at the gate.

“

How can we choreograph our care to allow people respite from the landscape of urgency, while also continuing to hold the line?

– Naro, Keri

”

For many defenders, the urgency is physical. Naro described indigenous defenders in the Visayas region of the Philippines, living behind barricades protecting their ancestral land from mining companies. **There is no mental health day that does not carry consequences. If you leave for a day, the bulldozers may have moved by the time you return.**

In contexts like this, **the answer to “how do people rest?” requires choreography, a coordinated relay system where someone who is rested and whole steps into the line so that someone exhausted can step back – without the movement collapsing.**

The movements practising this are developing mutual aid systems structured around rest, capacity, and emotional replenishment – not just around material needs.



Building Wellbeing Into Movement Strategy

The session surfaced four dimensions of what intentional, institutionalised wellbeing looks like in practice:

1

Build a shared language of care first

Collective wellbeing begins with co-creation – surfacing what care means in this specific community, in this specific language, in this specific context. **The question is: what would wellbeing concretely look like here, and what do we need to dismantle in our processes to practise it?**

In the Philippines, Keri uses the concept of *ginhawa* – a Filipino word that holds together the meanings of ease, breath, and wellbeing, suggesting that to be well is first to be able to breathe freely – as a shared framework that guides collective decisions.



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2

Make wellbeing part of governance

Organisational constitutions, policies, monitoring systems, and key performance indicators should reflect wellbeing as a valued outcome. When people's health and how the organisation feels are included in what an organisation measures as success, it signals that care is structural, not decorative.

3

Create processes for relational repair

Some of the greatest threats to activist wellbeing come from within movements themselves – unresolved conflict, accumulated grievances, imperfect solidarities. Intentional processes for repairing relationships after harm are as important as any external advocacy strategy. Without them, movements fracture from the inside.

4

Address intergenerational trauma as a movement issue

Carol raised the particular challenge of Myanmar's context: five years of military coup, ongoing violence, and the weight of unprocessed trauma passed across generations. When trauma is not addressed collectively, it shapes the next generation's capacity to organise – and the next struggle's starting conditions. Understanding this is not optional for movement sustainability.

Disability Justice as the Measure of Collective Care

Where do you start when building genuine collective care? Naro offered a clear answer: start with disabled defenders. **If disabled defenders in your movement feel they belong – that they are not being left behind by the pace or the structure of the work – then you are practising collective care. If they don't, the infrastructure isn't there yet, regardless of what the policies say.**

This matters because urgency culture tends to reward speed and stamina above everything else. In that culture, people with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or different capacities are often the first to be pushed out.

Disability justice activists carry decades of knowledge about building environments that are genuinely inclusive – knowledge that able-bodied movements have historically ignored.

A movement that listens to them has to slow down, restructure its meeting formats, reconsider what full participation actually means. And in doing that, it builds something that works for everyone. The activist who is burnt out, the parent who cannot attend evening meetings, the person processing trauma – they all benefit from a movement that stopped designing only for those with the most capacity to endure.





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What Collective Care Looks Like

Across the session, participants shared what care actually looks like in their teams, organisations, and movements. The picture that emerged was grounded and unglamorous – consistent, intentional presence over grand programmes.

- ✦ **Care shows up in someone asking “how are you today?”** when you arrive, a colleague picking you up from the bus station after a long trip in the field, cooking and sharing food together, deliberately stopping the productivity cycle, painting with human rights defenders in exile. These are all habits – small, consistent acts – that rebuild the social fabric between crises.
- ✦ **Language itself is also a care practice.** Working in English in multicultural spaces can narrow how people express themselves, excluding dimensions of care that other languages carry more naturally. The language an organisation adopts for its policies shapes who feels centred and who feels like a guest.
- ✦ On the more structural end: weekly check-ins that open with how people are arriving – not what they are delivering; **wellbeing frameworks embedded in HR policies** including mental health leave, menopause leave, and psychosocial support. All signals that care is institutional, not occasional.
- ✦ Every Friday, ExileHub holds a gratitude circle – one hour to acknowledge what is still good, together. They play Chinlone, a traditional Myanmar sport with no opposing team, where the entire goal is keeping the ball in the air together. Cooperation is the point.



Explaining to activists how neglecting self-care damages the people they love and the work they are committed to – making it relational rather than individualist – is what begins to shift the narrative.

– Carol, ExileHub



What We Learned. And What Comes Next

The Vuka Coalition Wellbeing Dialogue Series built toward a single, clear conclusion: **wellbeing is political infrastructure.**



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The movements that invest in collective support, emotional literacy, and culturally rooted care become more effective, more sustainable, and harder to break.

Ancestral healing practices were never informal – they were formal, tested, and sophisticated, and reclaiming them is an act of resistance. That infrastructure must be embedded – in governance, strategy, and the daily habits of how movements treat their own people.

This dialogue series does not end here. As of June, Vuka Coalition will begin rolling out a new civic action framework that embeds wellbeing alongside other pillars of civic space infrastructure. The question now is **how we push it into institutional planning – how we turn these conversations into policies, frameworks, and practices that outlast any single dialogue series.**

Food for thought

“By taking care of our own emotional, physical, and psychological safety, we are demonstrating – we are practising – human rights.”
— Carol, ExileHub

“A good runner is not the one who always finishes first. A good runner is someone who knows when to take a break.”
— Reylynne de la Paz, CIVICUS

“We are nurturing ourselves and nurturing the next generation so that we can continue to pass on the struggle.”
— Naro, Keri

The fight is long. Care is what keeps us in it.
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[Session #2 \(Decolonising Wellbeing\).](#)