



# AARCON REPORT

AARHUS CENTRE FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

ISSUE 1 | DECEMBER 2023



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Aarcon Report is a publication series for academics, practitioners and students, published by Aarhus Centre for Conflict Management (Aarcon)

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Moesgaard Campus.

# Introduction to Aarhus Centre for Conflict Management (Aarcon)

CHRISTIAN GADE – DIRECTOR OF AARCON

Aarcon (<https://aarcon.au.dk>) is a new conflict management centre, established at Aarhus University in 2023 and located at the picturesque Moesgaard Campus. Why was this new centre created? What sets it apart from existing centres? What is its current status, and what aspirations does it hold for the future? I will address these questions below.

## Why Was the Centre Created?

The centre was established to promote collaboration, knowledge exchange, and mutual learning among researchers, students, and practitioners working with conflict in the broadest sense of the word. At Aarcon, we do not limit our interest to a specific type of conflict, but rather engage with various conflict-related issues that are currently relevant to those affiliated with the centre. Presently, these issues encompass access to justice, border conflicts, climate justice, communication, gender conflicts, human-wildlife conflicts, human security, international criminal justice, land conflicts, and restorative justice. However, as the interests of the affiliated individuals are likely to evolve over time, so too will the issues we address at Aarcon.

“It is an ‘open’ centre where everybody is welcome to be affiliated, and it inspires to be a creative space where we try to challenge established assumptions and develop new ideas together...”

## What Sets Aarcon Apart?

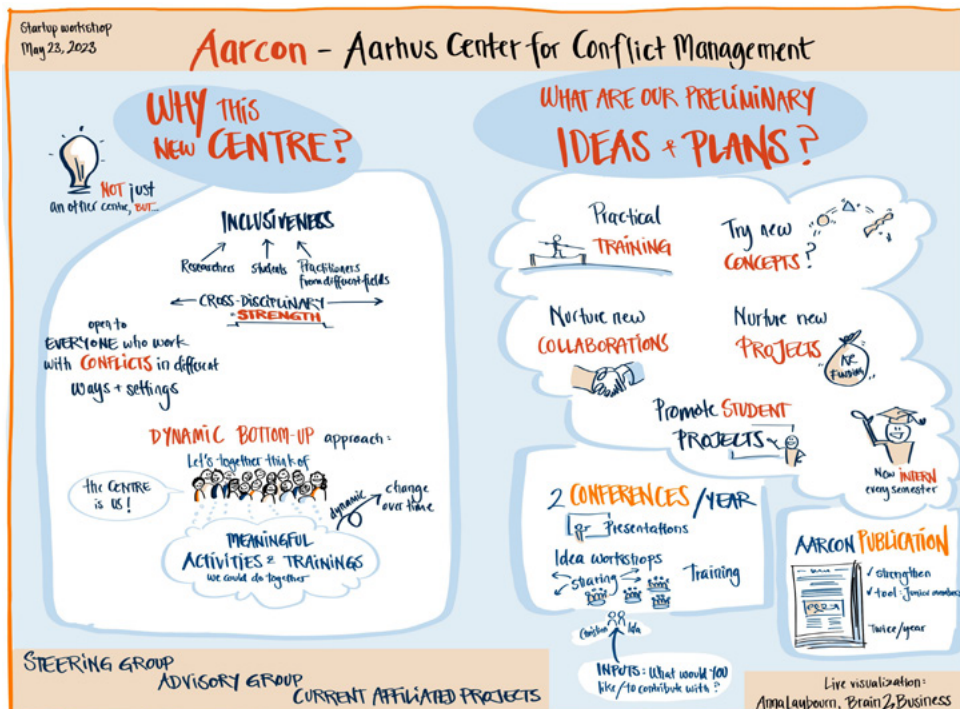
Aarcon is innovative in the sense that it embodies a unique centre design. This design combines a dynamic bottom-up approach to activities, an inclusive approach to participation, and a circular approach to organization. I will now present these three dimensions one by one.

*A bottom-up approach to activities* means that everyone affiliated with the centre should have the opportunity to influence the activities we undertake. For instance, if some of the affiliated individuals wish to do mediation training together, they are free to form a training group under the centre’s umbrella. The only stipulation is that no activities should be discriminatory towards any group. Essentially, Aarcon aims to make a positive contribution to a peaceful society, not the opposite.

*An inclusive approach to participation* means that anyone working with conflict, in any capacity, is welcome to affiliate with the centre and have a short profile featured on the centre’s website. The only requirement is that each affiliated person makes a positive contribution to the centre. This contribution can take various forms – participating in existing activities, taking the initiative to establish new activities, assisting in spreading the word about the centre, and more. We all lead different lives, so it’s natural that each of us will contribute in our own unique way. My hope is that the centre will evolve into a truly interdisciplinary hub, fostering connections and creating fresh collaborations among researchers, students, and practitioners.

*A circular approach to organization* means that the centre follows a cyclical organizational process that restarts every half-year. The biannual cycle commences with a conference, either the Aarcon Summer Conference in June or the Aarcon Winter Conference in December. During these events, participants share information about their recent work in relation to conflict. Concrete ideas for new centre activities are pitched, discussed, and potentially set into motion. Moreover, these conferences feature presentations, trainings, and more, all based on suggestions from previous conferences. For instance, at the upcoming Aarcon Winter Conference 2023, Kurt Mosgaard and Anton Baare from the Danish UN Association will give a presentation,

and Ann Fagerdal will lead a session on transformative mediation. Following the conference, the Aarcon intern team will assist in the practical implementation of centre activities, such as booking rooms at the university, and they will help to organize the next conference. We anticipate having 1-3 interns affiliated with Aarcon every half-year.



Visualization by Anna Laybourn, Brain2Business.

To facilitate knowledge sharing, we have launched a centre publication series named *Aarcon Report*. Within this series, researchers, students, and practitioners can contribute short texts related to their work. These texts will be readily accessible on the Aarcon website, and I envision the publication series evolving into a valuable resource for those engaged in conflict-related fields. For more details about *Aarcon Report*, please contact Mikel J.H. Venhovens, the Editor-in-Chief.

## What Is the Current Centre Status, and What Aspirations Does the Centre Hold for the Future?

I applied for the establishment of Aarcon in 2022, and the School of Culture and Society at Aarhus University formally created the centre in January 2023. In May of the same year, we held our start-up workshop at Moesgaard Museum where we discussed the centre and shared visions for its development. The dialogues were visualized by Anna Laybourn, who created the drawing above.





Aarcon start-up workshop on May 23, 2023.

In addition to the five members of the Aarcon Steering Group and the seven members of the Advisory Board, 51 researchers, students, and conflict management practitioners are currently affiliated with Aarcon. You can read the profiles of all these individuals [here](#). Furthermore, we currently have nine projects associated with the centre. You will find more information about these projects [here](#). The Aarcon Report is also up and running and has been assigned an ISSN number.

The next significant milestone is the Aarcon Winter Conference 2023, scheduled to take place at Moesgaard Campus on December 11, 2023. Attendance fees and the program can be accessed [here](#). I am optimistic that this event will serve as the foundation for new Aarcon activities. I also hope that more individuals will express interest in affiliating with us and contributing to the development of a robust and meaningful centre.



#### About the author

Christian Gade is an Associate Professor of Human Security and Anthropology at Aarhus University. In addition, he is the Director of Aarhus Centre for Conflict Management (Aarcon) and the Coordinator of the Master's degree programme in Human Security.

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# **Aarcon Report: A Publication Series on Conflict for and by Practitioners, Academics and Students**

MIKEL VENHOVENS – EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF AARCON REPORT

As part of the Aarhus Centre for Conflict Management, the Aarcon Report aims to be an open-access publication series, and thereby a forum for people with different professional backgrounds, focuses, seniority, and opinions, but all with one focus in common: the understanding of conflict in its broadest sense.

## **World(s) of Conflict(s)**

Conflict has always been a compelling, sensitive, and thought-provoking subject for academics, politicians, corporations, and organizations. And rightfully so. Although conflict has been around since the existence of humankind, today we still find ourselves in the middle of numerous conflicts, ranging from inter-state, communal, to personal. There seems to be no end to the commencement of conflicts or the emergence of new types of crises and conflicts. From conflicts between persons, groups, nations, to global environmental issues caused by the current climate crisis that we are facing today, we as individual human beings play an immense role in all of them.



Society is an accumulation of individuals, all acting both independently and collectively, who are all affected by conflict one way or the other at a certain time in their lives. Conflicts can profoundly affect people's lives, whether it is a global climate crisis, violent ethnic conflict, or a conflict between neighbours. They affect both victims and perpetrators, transform life trajectories, and change communities. While the study of and the urge to understand conflict might be as old as the oldest conflict itself, the knowledge, and ways to approach it are still evolving.

## **A Symbiotic Relationship**

Recognizing the diversity of conflicts worldwide, researchers and professionals are increasingly conducting in-depth, localized studies to understand the unique dynamics and drivers of conflicts. This emphasis on the local context allows for more tailored interventions and conflict mediation strategies that are sensitive to the specific needs and challenges of affected communities and/or individuals (Bozic, 2021; Lopes de Oliveira & Lewenstein, 2023). While the renewed focus on the local context has often been attributed to violent conflicts, 'the local' has been always been present in certain smaller forms and scales of conflict, such as conflict resolution and mediation in issues between individuals and (local) governments or intra-organisational work conflicts.

In the past, the collaboration between academia and the professional world in addressing conflicts has proven to be a crucial and symbiotic partnership (Lokot & Wake, 2023). Academia brings forth research, critical analysis, and a wealth of expertise on the root causes and dynamics of the diverse types of conflicts. NGOs, companies, small organisation, and governmental institutions operating in everyday conflicts possess invaluable practical experience, on-the-ground insights, and a direct connection to affected communities and persons. This partnership allows for the translation of academic knowledge into actionable strategies for peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, policing, environmental activism, and conflict management/mediation, while in turn bringing often valuable information to academia, which might often be hard to come by.

By prioritizing the involvement of local communities, individuals and organisations, and by focusing on their experiences, needs, and perspectives (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013), researchers and practitioners increasingly seek to engage with stakeholders on the ground, to design more effective and sustainable peacebuilding, conflict transformation and reconciliation initiatives.

## **Aarcon Report: A Forum for Understanding, Sharing, and Collaboration**

Ultimately, such collaboration fosters a more comprehensive, informed, and effective response to conflicts, whether it is for promoting lasting peace and stability in regions marred by crises, establishing a safe working environment, or battling climate issues. To facilitate this, with Aarcon Report we aim to

be a space for interdisciplinary dialogue between academics, students, and practitioners in the field of conflict. As part of the Aarhus Centre for Conflict Management (Aarcon), we strive to be a platform for people with different professional backgrounds, diverse stories, and approaches to different forms of conflict. We are interested in all forms of conflicts and encourage future contributors to push the boundaries of thinking what conflict entails and highlight often overlooked examples of conflict. Therefore, we would like to see the name of the journal as programmatic, a continuous report on the state of affairs regarding the current debates on conflict in the most diverse and broadest way possible. A report from a diverse group of academics, professionals, students, and anyone who is affected by and interested in the broad range of what conflict studies has to offer.

We would very much like to invite you all in making this publication series a relevant and exciting forum, through which we can share ideas and bring the theoretical and practical closer together in our effort to analyse and understand the diversity of contemporary conflict in a comprehensive and excelling way.

We are very much looking forward to your contributions!

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### About the author

Mikel Venhovens is a postdoctoral researcher at the Anthropology Department and Human Security program at Aarhus University, and the Moving Matters Research Group at the University of Amsterdam. In addition, he is currently the editor-in-chief of Aarcon Report.

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Remote mountainous area of Arreguy, Haiti 2019, © María Cotarelo.

# Potential of grounded interventions to change community dynamics: an NGO experience in Haiti

MARÍA COTARELO<sup>1</sup>

Back in 2019 I visited the remote area of Arreguy in Haiti. I was there on a field mission to monitor the development of several projects implemented by the Haitian partner organisation of the Spanish internationally focused NGO I was working for at that moment.

## A Welcoming Family in Arreguy

The main focus of the two NGOs was to promote the universal human right to quality education, thus enabling other rights: the right to work, to equality, to an adequate standard of living, to a dignified life. This is particularly crucial – as well as challenging – in a context of a de facto failed state, where institutions are fragile or lack the necessary resources to ensure social welfare, and around 90% of the educational institutions are non-public in the poorest country in the LAC region (World Bank: 2023).

1. The views expressed by the author in this article reflect only the author's ideas and do not represent the opinions or positions of any current or past entities the author has been affiliated to.

Arreguy, a rural, remote area with limited or no access to basic services, faces high levels of poverty and vulnerability. After Hurricane Matthew in 2016, we raised funding to reconstruct schools and housing as an enabling strategy to ensure access to quality education for all children as soon as possible after the natural disaster. Having a home brings a feeling of empowerment and worthiness to parents, allowing them to engage in economic activities and enrol their children in schools. Such initiatives were intended to increase children's chances to obtain a job and a dignified life in the future.

As part of our NGO's project monitoring activities, I was lucky enough to visit several communities supported by the intervention and engage in conversation with the families of school children. I specifically remember one of the constructed houses we were kindly invited to visit. It was humble. The exterior had been built according to regulations, which were in place to prevent hurricane and earthquake-caused damage. The interior only had a few pieces of handmade wood furniture. The family of four felt awkward for not being able to offer us a more comfortable visit and yet, they were as welcoming as can be. They explained how the house had changed their lives as they were homeless before. A house provided them with the opportunity to establish a place to manufacture and sell goods, allowing them to enrol their children in school. We shared the coconut water they offered and said our goodbyes and best wishes. They seemed hopeful, despite everything. Hope is something increasingly uncommon in Haiti.



One of the houses rebuilt after Hurricane Matthew with support of the project, Haiti 2019, © María Cotarelo.



**“ We shared the coconut water they offered and said our goodbyes and best wishes. They seemed hopeful, despite everything. Hope is something increasingly uncommon in Haiti.**

## Life in Haiti today

Only four years have passed since that visit in 2019 but the situation has rapidly degraded, not only in Port-au-Prince and other big cities but also in rural and remote areas where conflict and violence had traditionally been more benevolent. Recent developments include a price increase in oil, which is crucial for day-to-day life since the public electricity grid cannot be trusted; protests; government’s failure to control violence; de-facto rule of violent gangs; thousands trying to flee the country; kidnappings, robberies, murders; and children missing school and their childhood (Al Jazeera: 2022; Douyon: 2023; Reuters: 2023; The Guardian: 2023; UNICEF: 2023). Haitians have been fighting for their homeland, sovereignty, and freedom for more than 500 years against foreign and domestic mismanagement, before and after independence, respectively. They still do, although it is getting harder due to the reigning violence and lawlessness.

My contacts in Haiti are afraid to go out on the streets, not even to do something “defiant” such as protesting or similar activities out of line with the gangs’ instructions, but just to try to buy some food for the day. Haitians who would have never thought of leaving the country are increasingly considering this as the only viable option to survive. We will have to wait to assess the impact that the recently approved UN Security Council international mission may have on the country – and its population (UN News: 2023). The mission should be accompanied by a strategy to ensure that stability will be maintained after its mandate ends to avoid mistakes of the past.

## Need to Keep Working for Hope

Even though the current situation is close to a humanitarian crisis, the development work of NGOs continues to be essential provided they can stay active. Ideally, these organisations are neutral, their main goal is to empower communities and they usually have a global vision of the interrelated needs and issues in a particular area, thereby being able to address the actual challenges on an interconnected and multifaceted level. In the case of house reconstruction in Arreguy, not only housing was being provided. This initiative was accompanied by an integral intervention, including the reconstruction of schools, community empowerment and capacity building, training

for teachers, as well as hygiene training for disease prevention after the hurricane. And, of course, it also included an advocacy strategy to compel institutions and communities to prioritise children's right to quality education. These grounded interventions might seem to have little relevance in a macro perspective, but in reality, they have the potential of exponentially changing community dynamics and fostering positive behaviours and commitment of educational communities in order to build more peaceful, equal, and resilient societies. Education may be a slow tool, but it's a powerful one to transform the world.

I never got to see that family in Arreguy again, but I think of them occasionally, wishing they still nurture some of the hope they displayed that day. There must be hope somewhere.

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### About the author

María Cotarelo is a professional in the field of international cooperation and social development, specialising in promoting the right to education, gender issues and youth empowerment. She has worked for NGOs, private sector, international organisations, and is currently working at UNICEF Spain on a programme to improve employability of vulnerable youth.

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"Take a seat on the dialogue-bench" ©Ann Fagerdal

## Ann Fagerdal & Transformative Mediation

IDA KROMANN – HUMAN SECURITY MASTER'S STUDENT  
& AARCON INTERN

Ann Fagerdal, a seasoned professional with over 25 years of experience in leadership, management, and organizational development, is now taking on transformative mediation. As transformative mediation is a relatively uncharted territory within the Danish mediation communities, Aarhus Centre for Conflict Management (Aarcon) has invited Ann to speak about her experiences at the upcoming Aarcon Winter Conference. In this article, we explore Ann's professional background, her approach to transformative mediation, and the model's value in contemporary conflict management.

Ann Fagerdal was initially trained in accounting, but professional positions in leadership, HR, and management quickly sparked her interest. Ann found she had talent and a passion for fostering cooperation and resolving conflicts. These were skills she developed at the early onset of her career when she, among other things, contributed to the establishment of a major conference & holiday resort formerly known as Søhøjlandet, but today operating under the name Feriepark Landal Søhøjlandet. Here, Ann encountered the challenges and substantial conflicts involved in building organisations. These experiences became the foundation for her future work on mediation and conflict management.

“ I’m no expert. I would like to emphasise this. I am here to learn and share my experience.



Ann Fagerdall, photo by Søren Kjeldgaard.

Continuing her career, Ann took on a role in the executive secretariat for Herman Salling, and later as an HR-business partner at the Salling Group. Here she gained insights into the power of collective decision-making and its potential for driving substantial change.

Later as a consultant for UKON (formerly Udviklingskonsulenterne), she specialized in conflict resolution, particularly addressing complex disputes and facilitating “the difficult conversation”. Ann’s diverse background, and her role as a special consultant in leadership at Region Syddanmark, further enriched her expertise in conflict resolution.

## THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

“The difficult conversation” or “Den svære samtale” is a Danish phrase commonly used by professionals within fields of leadership. The origin of the phrase is uncertain, but generally, the phrase refers to discussions that are challenging, sensitive, or potentially conflict-ridden. These conversations may involve topics that evoke intense emotions, require deep communication, or involve the discussion of controversial issues.

Ann Fagerdal prefers calling it “The important conversation” or “Den vigtige samtale”.



Ann now works both as a mediator and facilitator for EGN (Executive Global Network) operating within leadership-focused networking groups as well as in her own consultant company [Friis & Fagerdal](#). Here, she and her colleague Bjarne Friis Pedersen foster workplace welfare and leadership development through conflict resolution training. Specifically working with the empowerment of leaders, optimizing their conflict resolution capabilities, so they themselves can become mediators of “the difficult conversation”.

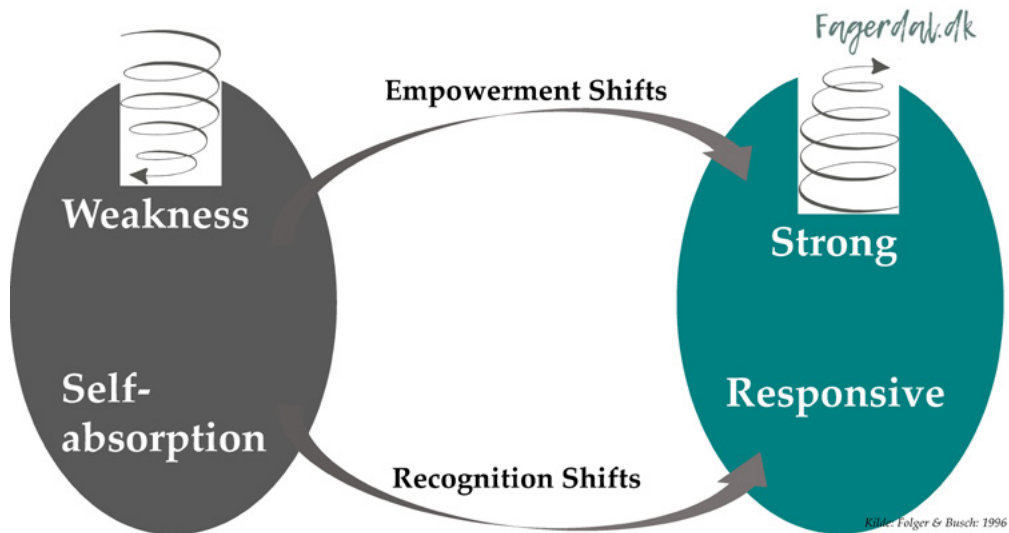
## Ann’s Journey into Transformative Mediation

Ann’s entry into the world of transformative mediation shows her hands-on, practical approach to learning as it combines formal education, self-organized training, and active participation in transformative mediation courses.

When talking about her background, she tells me that she has taken two basic modules on conflict transformation, one of which was at the [Center for konfliktløsning](#). While these modules represent her initial foray into formal conflict resolution education, most of Ann’s knowledge comes from professional experience. It stems from her undying curiosity and drive to better herself and the world around her. She stated: “I’ve always been interested in it [conflict mediation], so I’ve chosen to create my own training groups.” Over eight years, she organized regular meetings with a group of like-minded professionals to train and hone their mediation skills. The group was taught by a facilitator with multiple years of mediation experience. Additionally, she has recently become the first certified transformative mediator in Scandinavia after completing virtual transformative mediation trainings at the [Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation](#) (ISCT) located in The United States of America, home to the transformative mediation tradition (Bush & Folger 1994).

## What is Transformative Mediation?

Transformative mediation is a conflict resolution model that empowers parties to discover their own solutions, rebuild relationships, and gain deeper insights into each other’s perspectives. It centres on the parties’ choices, voices, and transforming communication. To give us a preview of what Transformative Mediation is about, Ann created an illustration and a hallmark describing the essentials of what both the model and approach are about.



This model views conflict as an opportunity for personal growth, self-determination, and relationship enhancement. It acknowledges that individuals often become “weak” and “self-absorbed” during conflicts. The mediator’s role is to help the parties to become “stronger” and more “responsive” to others. “It’s the parties’ conversation – and they choose how they will have the conversation” Ann highlighted the shift from “self-absorbed” to “responsive” as fundamental. Parties are encouraged to take control of their conversations, topics, and manner of engaging in discussions.

## 10 Hallmarks Transformative Practice

Fagerdal.dk

1. Mediators role is based on empowerment and recognition
2. It's ultimately the parties 'choice' (leaving responsibility for outcomes with the parties)
3. The parties know best
4. The parties have what it takes (optimistic view)
5. There are facts in the feelings
6. Clarity emerges from confusion
7. The action is 'in the room'
8. Discussing the Past has value to the present
9. Conflict can be a long-term affair
10. Small steps count

Kilde: Folger & Busch: 1996

The Transformative mediation model is distinguishable from other models where mediators more actively guiding conversations via questions and suggestions. In transformative mediation, mediators offer support but refrain from steering parties toward specific solutions. Instead, the most central thing mediators focus on is “reflection” and “summary” to help parties gain insights and make choices.

## Why Transformative Mediation Matters

According to Ann, the model's unique value lies in empowering individuals by promoting self-awareness, constructive communication, active listening, and decision-making.

Ann's passion for this approach is rooted in the belief that understanding the value of conflict resolution is crucial. She notes that: "Many companies simply don't have the awareness yet of the potential of mediation - its value and effect as a tool".

**“ We need to create awareness of how powerful a tool mediation really is.**

She does, however, recognize that not everyone is comfortable talking about conflict. Therefore, in her commitment to making the concept more accessible and appealing, especially to those who might hesitate to seek assistance under the label of "conflict resolution", Ann works with alternative phrasing such as "relational conflicting". "I don't care what it's called as long as it works", Ann remarked with the warmest of smiles.

*Friis & Fagerdal's* commitment to the empowerment of leaders as mediators of change has proven truly helpful in enhancing workplace harmony and overall well-being. "We see a huge effect when we train and work with leaders. [...] But it is in the overall welfare, where it is reflected the most."

Ann's journey is an inspiring testament to a curious mind and the willingness to embrace every challenge as an opportunity for learning and growth. This reminds us that conflict resolution is not just about solving problems; it is about building bridges, strengthening relationships, and driving positive change.

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### About the author

Ida Lindskrog Kromann is a Human Security master's student with a bachelor's degree in Anthropology from Aarhus University. She is currently interning at Aarcon whilst doing her thesis research. Specifically looking at de-escalation and communication tactics used by persons in unbalanced power dynamics to lessen the danger of conflicts.

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Dragon dance by a resident in the community, China. Photo by Wei Zhu, July 2023.

## In what I believe: Identity conflict in a Chinese Community Worker

WEI ZHU - PHD STUDENT, DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, AARHUS UNIVERSITY

Sister Lan was the most senior staff in her community, located in the southeastern China<sup>1</sup>. After having worked there for 15 consecutive years, she became the affectionate “sister” for everyone. Meanwhile, for anyone who saw her on a regular basis, some of her behavioral traits that belonged to a Buddhist were hard to miss.

To start with, she would recite in a low voice *Namo Amitābha* when trying to stay calm during an unpleasant encounter, or, if such attempt failed, to recover her equanimity. When there was nothing left on her task list, she would – in a quite serene manner – transcribe the *Diamond Sutra* with golden ink into a well-kept scroll, instead of fiddling with mobile phones like her younger colleagues. She kept a strictly vegetarian diet for ten days a month, and for the rest of time she avoided meat as much as possible. One month

1. Due to the safety and privacy reasons, names and locations in this article have been anonymized.

after knowing each other, she gave me – as well as some of her colleagues – a bodhi bracelet as a gift. It cost little but signified much: the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment under a bodhi tree, making bodhi seeds common materials for prayer beads. “You should wear it and turn it by touching every bead constantly so that the beads will shine,” she said, with joyful pride in her voice, when showing me the prayer beads she was wearing, “see how shiny mine are!”

## A Conflicting Identity

None of this would have been problematic if Sister Lan had not been a community worker and a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The original Chinese word equivalent to community, *shequ* (社区), contains different shades of meaning from what its English translation suggests. It is a grassroots institution at the bottom level of the urban governance system, designed to serve multiple purposes of the Party-State and extend its reach to people’s everyday life. It is through the community that people experience the Party-State, and this holds true not only for residents but also for community workers like Sister Lan. As salaried agents on the ground, community workers are heavily relied upon by the Party-State for their local knowledge to do all sorts of tasks (Zhu 2023). However, they work on a contractual basis, with no access to the welfare and guarantee promised only to those who have life tenure within the system. In other words, community workers occupy a functionally indispensable yet organizationally marginalized place in the governance system, and the way they experience the Party-State – from within – becomes thus complicated and subject to conflicts.

**“Certain transcendental values are revealed to and embraced by her in her Buddhist way of living on one hand, while on the other hand, as a government employee and a CCP member, she is forbidden from having religious beliefs.**

Sister Lan was no stranger to such conflicts. She found herself caught up between conflicting values and identities. Certain transcendental values are revealed to and embraced by her in her Buddhist way of living on one hand, while on the other hand, as a government employee and a CCP member, she is forbidden from having religious beliefs. Although it is stated in the Constitution that Chinese citizens enjoy freedom of religion, the Party-State remains officially atheist and all religions and “superstitions” are banned for its members (Leung 2005). In a later interview, I asked Sister Lan about her

beliefs. She answered with a hesitating smile: “Well I cannot be called a Buddhist...It is not allowed for a Party member after all.” After a short pause, she added in a hurrying tone: “But I myself quite believe in Buddhism.”

The way Sister Lan negotiates between her two conflicting identities seems straightforward: she denies one and confirms the other. What makes this statement noteworthy is the hesitance in her denial and the fact that such an identity claim diverges from the lived reality of her everyday life. She was apparently unwilling to renounce her commitments to Buddhism even after she refused to be identified as a Buddhist. The identity she chose in a matter-of-fact way, was her membership of the CCP. However, despite this explicit choice, this identity label comes with no substantial content underneath: unlike her daily adherence to practices that befit a Buddhist, she seldom did anything that could be attributed to her Party membership. For the five months I stayed in the community, she did not even attend the regular study sessions of Party ideology – she would only be present if too few people showed up and the room seemed therefore embarrassingly empty.

**“ The thick identity does not have to be acknowledged; it may even get denied publicly for various reasons.**

## A Thick and Thin Identity

I propose that the incongruity in the identity claim of Sister Lan can be understood in a contrast between a thick and thin identity. Here a “thick identity” resonates with what Mattingly (2014: 18) called a “thick self”: it is embedded in a lived present that one finds ethically at stake and has a temporal dimension that directs toward one’s project of moral becoming. In contrast, a thin identity is static and involves no such becoming; it is a label one puts onto oneself for practical purposes – for getting a potential promotion within the Party-State system, for instance – and its highlight is the very moment of acquisition. The thick identity does not have to be acknowledged; it may even get denied publicly for various reasons. But it informs what one commits and aspires to in everyday life. Sometimes, it emerges to the front stage and pushes aside the declared thin identity in unexpected ways. In the current case, the thick identity announced its existence even at the risk of contradicting what is imposed by the Party-State. In the same interview, after much complaining about her job, Sister Lan started to talk about what motivated her to continue after 15 years as a community worker. “I keep telling myself,” She said, “perhaps this is what the Boddhisatva (*Pusa*, 菩萨) has planned for me.”



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### About the author

Wei Zhu is a PhD student at the Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University. Her ongoing work investigates everyday ethics in Chinese urban communities, with a focus on how people negotiate their way of being and live an ethical life against the backdrop of the pervasive presence of the Party-State.

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## **A Dialogue with Kurt Mosgaard: The Danish UN Association, and the Need for Cooperation at the Global Stage**

MARCUS ARAÚJO DE AMORIM STEFFENSEN – HUMAN SECURITY STUDENT, AARHUS UNIVERSITY INTERN AT AARCON

In a world increasingly marked by diverse challenges such as climate change, violent conflict and growing inequality, the United Nations (UN) stands as a key contributor to global solutions. Kurt Mosgaard, a board member of the Danish UN Association, passionately advocates for greater support and participation in the United Nations. In a recent interview, he shared his insights on the UN's role, challenges, and the importance of fostering international cooperation.

### **The Danish UN Association**

The Danish UN Association is an organisation that works closely with governmental and non-governmental actors, with the aim of promoting the missions and values of the UN. Its membership base is diverse, blending 300 individuals, political parties, companies and organisations, with a central secretariat located in Copenhagen. Governance is entrusted to a 15-member board, and they are responsible for overseeing the association's strategic direction and decision-making.

Operating at the local level, distinct representative groups exercise autonomy through their local boards, actively coordinating grassroots activities. Currently, Mosgaard is operating in Viborg, setting up a conference in collaboration with the municipality. This conference will showcase regional efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other relevant activities relating to the UN's mission. Notably, while Aarhus presently lacks a permanent representation, past collaborations with the municipality reflect the association's openness to future partnerships and engagement in the city.



Kurt Mosgaard.

## Navigating Multipolarity: UN Strategies for Fostering Peace and Cooperation in a World of Conflicting Interests

For decades since the end of the Cold War, we have seen the United States of America (US) stand out as the clear global hegemon. Yet, many postulate that this picture may have changed, namely with the rise of China as a potential head-to-head competitor with the US, and the rise of regional powers such as India, Iran and Saudi Arabia. With an increasingly even distributed balance of power, we are seeing more of these emerging states push their own agendas, despite being at odds with those of other states. According to Mosgaard, this situation has only become more dire. Currently, we see this clearly in the UN Security Council (UNSC) and its inability to stop the Russian-Ukrainian War. However, as Mosgaard also points out, even if cooperation seems harder to foster, its importance is in turn becoming more and more apparent. Climate change and war, among others, are issues that



## “ it is important to appreciate the incredible progress that the UN has achieved

transcend borders and impact all nations. The UN, with its diverse membership, can be seen as the best platform for nations to collaborate in finding common solutions to these pressing issues.

And while major setbacks like the war in Ukraine often take the front stage in the media, it is important to appreciate the incredible progress that the UN has achieved in other important areas. Mosgaard highlights the progress made toward achieving the SDGs. The world is gradually improving in areas such as poverty reduction, education, and healthcare. Yet, ongoing conflicts in regions like Ukraine and Palestine overshadow this progress.

According to Mosgaard, one of the mentalities that must currently be challenged, is the isolationist “America first!” or “Denmark first!” rhetoric. Smaller states such as Denmark, profit tremendously from acting within a cooperative and supportive international community, as these states are provided a platform to speak as equals to other states, regardless of size and power. Denmark is therefore able to express its interests without having to resort to formal means of power, which it lacks compared to its larger neighbours. For the larger countries, an organisation such as the UN is also incredibly beneficial, as it establishes a forum to tackle global issues more efficiently. Additionally, it is also an environment for states to leverage their soft power, by promoting ideas and acquiring legitimacy through international law.

In Denmark, the Danish UN Association actively promotes the importance of the UN within the country. It engages with various stakeholders, including political parties and EU parliamentarians, to influence foreign policy and emphasise the UN as a crucial tool for addressing global issues. These efforts often go unnoticed, but they are crucial in promoting cooperation worldwide.

## What Does the Future Hold for the Danish UN Association?

Mosgaard avidly envisions growth for the Danish UN Association: “We should not be 300 members; we should be several thousand!”. As the UN’s ideals resonate with many Danes, there is a lot of ample room for expansion. Most political parties, the parliament, and municipalities in Denmark already endorse the UN Association. The next step now is to expand beyond Copenhagen, and to organise activities and collaborations across the whole

“ We should not be 300 members; we should be several thousand!



country. In that regard, there is great reason for optimism. Denmark currently seeks to become a temporary member of the UN Security Council for the 2025-2026 period, which will bring significant media attention to the UN and the Danish UN Association, and hopefully new members too.

In conclusion, the Danish UN Association, represented by dedicated individuals like Mosgaard, plays a crucial role in promoting the UN's ideals, emphasising the importance of international cooperation. As the world faces increasingly complex challenges, the UN remains a beacon of hope for collective solutions and a brighter future.



#### About the author

Marcus Steffensen is a master's degree student in the Human Security program at Aarhus University, with a background in International Relations & Organizations. He is currently a full-time intern at Aarcon, and member of the editorial board.

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