



Activist care: Weaving memory, knowledge and mobility into protection

The first integrated Shelter City Netherlands Knowledge-Exchange Retreat with human rights defenders in October 2025 accomplished the creation of a shared field in which memory, knowledge and mobility converged to generate grounding, clarity, and renewed energy for the work of human rights defenders ahead. Dynamics which resonate strongly with the future direction of Shelter City: strengthening knowledge, expanding mobility for defenders, and developing sustainable support systems that extend well beyond a single programme cycle.

I. Rituals of collective memory

Memory appeared as a way of orienting oneself politically and emotionally. Each defender arrived with a personal object—a small item that carried a story of lineage, community or struggle. Sitting in pairs, they exchanged these objects and shared their meaning. Afterwards, each person placed the object they had received at the centre of the circle and reflected on how this object connected to broader struggles, to historical lineages, and to the forms of hope that still matter in a world under strain.

Through this gentle sequence—pair dialogue, exchange, and a collective centre—the objects moved from private memory to shared narrative. People recognised parts of themselves in one another's histories, even across vast distances. The ritual, echoing practices long used in Latin America to honour collective memory, allowed meaning to circulate without demanding personal disclosure. It anchored the group in a sense of shared dignity and purpose.

A separate moment invited the group to think with the body rather than speak about it. Drawing lightly on methods from Theatre of the Oppressed, defenders created collective images that represented the psychosocial realities HRDs are experiencing today. The aim was not performance, but recognition: a way of giving shape—together—to pressures that are often carried in silence. From these shared images, the group moved into a second movement: imagining what a global community of defenders could do to accompany one another. Small theatrical fragments emerged—gestures of protection, movements of interruption, postures of solidarity—which were then reinterpreted and expanded collectively.





In this setting, the body—so often the first place where fear and threat accumulate—became a site of understanding and possibility. The weight that usually sits on individual shoulders was distributed across the group, offering a quiet reminder that even the pressures of risk can shift when held collectively. Memory moved from description to presence, from the individual to the shared. One defender voiced what had gradually taken form: *“We are not alone.”*

For organizations accompanying HRDs, the implication is clear. Rituals, embodied practices and shared objects are part of the infrastructure that helps defenders reconnect to purpose, soften isolation, and recover the sense of belonging that prolonged exposure to uncertainty can weaken. In this context, memory becomes a political resource—something that steadies the body, strengthens relational ties, and sustains the capacity to continue.

What emerged across diverse contexts were shared structural patterns: invisible emotional labour (often gendered and unrecognized), shame around rest, fear of losing relevance during mobility, and difficulty processing internal conflict within organizations. Naming these collectively reframed exhaustion not as personal failure but as a political condition shaped by repression and precarity.

II. Knowledge exchange: From training to co-created understanding

Earlier in October, a preparatory session brought together participants to co-design a shared platform for exchange. During this meeting, they explored shared metaphors of weaving and pollination—adapted from John Paul Lederach’s reflections but reinterpreted collectively, in ways that spoke to the diverse movements represented in the group. Through inter-regional and intergenerational dialogue, defenders identified the intersections that shaped their work: region, type of activism, gender, age, precarity, and the shifting forms of political repression each of them faced.

Working collectively, they mapped the emerging themes that mattered most for a heterogeneous group coming from places as distant as Palestine, Ghana, Ethiopia, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Malaysia. From this mapping, four axes of exchange took shape: decolonial perspectives in human rights work, integrating gender as a structural lens, Ubuntu as a philosophy of relational being, and shared approaches to political imprisonment and arbitrary detention.





During the retreat, this preparatory work expanded into a week of co-created learning. Sessions on holistic security used scenario-based thinking to connect physical, digital, and psychosocial strategies in ways rooted in participants' contexts. A conversation on misinformation revealed the subtle forms through which political narratives shape danger and erode trust. A session on feminist perspectives in protection challenged conventional ideas of safety by foregrounding relationality, interdependence, and power. Across these spaces, knowledge moved laterally rather than vertically.

The most generative insights came from defenders themselves. Their analyses echoed one another across continents: the criminalization of dissent, the shrinking of civic space, the emotional costs of visibility, and the quiet strength that communities mobilize to sustain resistance. A strategy shaped through grassroots organizing in Venezuela illuminated a pathway in Vietnam; a practice of collective care rooted in Southeast Asia opened new understandings for participants working in Palestine, where poetry, memory, and the everyday gestures of perseverance have long served as forms of protection and political clarity. Meanwhile, feminist approaches grounded in Latin American movements reframed conversations among defenders from Eastern Europe. As one participant stated simply: *"It feels like being woven into a wider web."*

A critical insight emerged from this process: emotional and relational labour, so often invisibilized and unevenly distributed, must be recognized as political work. When defenders learn to redistribute care collectively rather than isolating it in individual shoulders or gendered expectations, movements become more sustainable. This is about transforming how responsibility for collective wellbeing is shared and organized.

III. Sustainability of practices: Mobility, relationality, and the work of continuity

The retreat did not end in Zeeland. Its impact depended on what would continue afterwards—on whether the connections, insights and practices developed during the week could become part of a longer arc of accompaniment. Sustainability, in this sense, is both institutional and relational. It concerns the quality of the ties defenders build with one another, and the capacity of those ties to endure once everyone returns to their own landscapes of risk and responsibility. This is what we mean by activist care: practices that strengthen both the relationships among defenders and the collective capacities within their organizations and communities, inviting care to occupy a central place in the broader political work of sustaining movements.





In Shelter City's experience, mobility has always played a dual role. It offers defenders temporary safety and time to breathe, but it also provides a vantage point from which we reorganize commitments, imagine alternatives, and reconnect with wider communities of practice. For defenders who are temporarily based outside their home countries, mobility can also offer a way of staying connected to their communities and struggles, countering isolation, and helping them weave solidarities that extend across borders.

In this sense, Shelter City can function as a pedagogical space by creating conditions where defenders rehearse collective care practices together. These practices travel back with defenders into their communities and organizations, strengthening not only individual wellbeing but the relational fabric that allows movements to endure.

The retreat made visible how powerful these relational dynamics can be. Bonds formed through structured sessions as well as through conversations at the table, shared silences, collaborative exercises, collective laughter, and the calm of a space intentionally designed for rest. These ties are a form of protection. When defenders know they are seen and accompanied by a wider community, their work becomes more sustainable, their risk more manageable, and their sense of purpose more anchored.

Within the Shelter City network, this retreat marked an important step in exploring collective approaches to care and learning. It has generated insights that we are now reflecting on, so that future editions, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, can continue to grow from this experience.

For Justice & Peace, this has practical implications. Strengthening alumni networks becomes an essential dimension of long-term protection. Supporting exchanges between cohorts helps transform relationships from temporary connections into sources of ongoing insight and solidarity. And designing future mobility programmes with sustainability in mind ensures that the benefits of retreat spaces do not dissipate once the week is over.

These directions align closely with the network's strategy for the coming years, which emphasizes knowledge-building, cross-regional mobility, and durable support structures rooted in care, community and shared agency. Sustainability, in this vision, is measured in the continued vitality of the relationships that defenders create with one another and in the collective capacity that emerges when those relationships endure.

**Some of these reflections on activist care have also appeared in [public writing](#) by members of the team, contributing to a broader conversation on the role of care in sustaining movements.*

