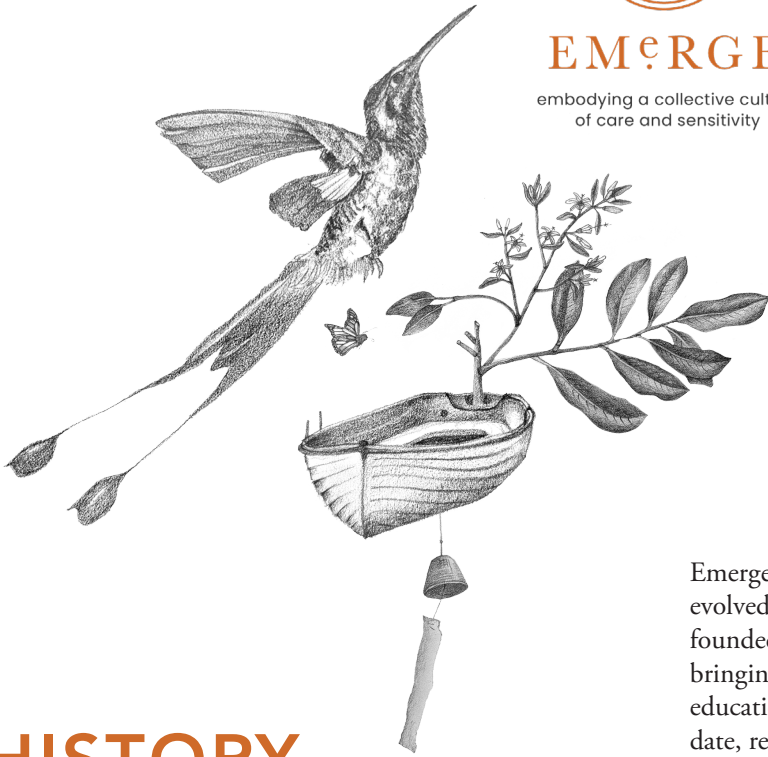




EMERGE

embodying a collective culture
of care and sensitivity



HISTORY

Our history is rooted in anthropology, peace education, peacebuilding, theater, dance and movement, Somatic Experiencing, Vipassana and Kalari, and connection to the land and ancestry. These became fundamental in the sense-making process and healing the sadness from having been born and raised in a country torn by war. The great teaching of all these disciplines together is that there is no formula to navigate what is human. And in that teaching is the essence of what moves us: how embodied care opens the capacity to listen.

Emerge has its origins in Breathe International, which itself evolved from the Colombian NGO RESPIRA en Colombia founded in 2013. Emerge is a transformative force, infusing/bringing mindful awareness and interoceptive practices into educational and humanitarian settings in 21 countries to date, reaching more than 500 communities and growing a network of 200 trained facilitators.

RESPIRA was conceived to integrate mindfulness practices within the frameworks of Peace Education and Social Emotional Learning in Colombia. The guiding question centered around how to build peace from within, especially in schools located in Bosa, Bogotá, in Tumaco, Nariño, and Tambo, Cauca – some of the places most affected by Colombia's armed conflict. The impact of this project is demonstrated in an evaluation carried out by University of Los Andes, conducted in collaboration with Save the Children. You can read more about it [here](#).

The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program intertwined with the national government program in schools, 'Aulas en Paz' ('Peaceful Classrooms'), was solid ground on which to found RESPIRA. Once in the field, however, Afrocolombian and Indigenous mothers, teachers and students brought together four very important pieces of a puzzle we were discovering as we lived alongside the community from 2014 to 2018: Care-, Safety-, Trauma- and Culture-sensitive components. We could experience how trauma and collective care were woven into the very foundations of how culture was being lived, expressed and re-created.



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HISTORY (continued)

When offering/creating safe spaces to work with body trauma sensitive interventions, what emerges is the nature of the resource: the memory of healing and resilience at the level of both the individual and the collective body. A sort of beauty and sense-making, an autonomy that we like to think is at the base/at the heart of what we call “dignity”.

At that time it was not clear what any of this meant. We were just learning how to listen to that which did not belong to anyone but wanted to be unfolded and leveraged in togetherness. It was not until we worked for the UN in South Sudan that it all started to emerge into words. Among the groups we worked with, we had the chance to work with the “burial team” in Bentiu, a camp hosting 300.000 IDPs. An evaluation of our work carried out by IFRC can be found [here](#).

7 South Sudanese men between 25 and 35 years old had buried all the bodies in the region in the period of conflict. We were told they had been diagnosed with PTSD due to nightmares and intrusive thinking. Over a 1 month period, we met twice per week, bringing attention to the present through the movements they were already making in grave digging which helped them in emotional regulation, opening space to share about their nightmares and worries. Together, in time and in the presence of attention in the body and the breath, we identified a longing. A longing to bury their dead with rituals and ceremonies and so we did. As in the ancestral Nuer knowledge, they made a ritual with barks of trees, they prayed, they made silence and shared. We could have never known, but safety and care offered the ground to uncover autonomy. To witness and heal.

It was a turning point that kept growing and evolving as we continued working with the UN, now in Bangladesh with the Rohingya community. Here, the focus of our work shifted: it was not with survivors but with local psychologists, social workers, and mental health volunteers from the communities working in one of the most complex and challenging humanitarian settings in the world. Through mindfulness and interoception, taking time to listen to oneself and others, and pausing before taking in the next co-creative breath of interventions, we started. Together

we worked to realize that they were as important as the community we were serving, that they needed time and space to share and move their own worries and in that way integrate and digest all they were experiencing, which was bigger than them, bigger than us, bigger than the whole UN system together. In that big unknown we can only take one step at a time, together giving time, giving space to find a natural, sensitive, autonomous human rhythm.

In another big unknown, the COVID-19 pandemic came, and with it more silence, alongside endless hours supporting teams in different countries and time zones. It came too, with a trend of more and more shallow “mindfulness” interventions, threatening the force of our work, of our heart and experience. The UN’s Gender Based Violence Area of Responsibility offered space for us to bring care and safety to GBV first responders’ mental health, and from 2020 to 2024 that has been a focus.

Working on-line and in person in 17 countries, we have continued weaving from those patterns first shown to us by Afro and indigenous communities on the Colombian Pacific coast, blending them with those patterns that sense to Mayan women in Guatemala, and to mental health workers in Ukraine, to social leaders from the Amazon, to Afghan doctors, and midwives in Libya. Safety-, Care-, Trauma-sensitive, and Culturally sensitive interventions are at the center of this work. An evaluation of it carried out by UNSW can be found [here](#).

That is the very essence of what EMERGE works with, fostering the sense of safety needed to reclaim and enjoy that which is wanting to be experienced fully: LIFE! Beyond conventional mindfulness practices, life itself has guided us into combining trauma-sensitive stress reduction and care interventions with creative expressions – singing, dancing, arts, poetry, traditional rituals, gardening, and ancestral connections to the land. These authentic expressions are the true embodiment of “living in the present,” transcending prescribed postures or methodologies. Despite curricula and methods, it is people who inherently hold the path beyond mere form – an understanding rooted in recovering and caring for the collective essence of life itself.