

Digital Pathways for Peace

Insights and lessons from a global online consultation

Executive Summary

August 2020



Digital technologies – electronic tools, software, platforms, systems and devices that help generate, store and/or transfer data – are playing an increasingly vital role in advancing peacebuilding activities around the world. Technological innovation has been a powerful democratising force which has opened new avenues and spaces for civic participation and collective action, empowering marginalised voices and enhancing local accountability. Moreover, increased connectivity has led to the development of powerful online communities, who are reshaping the social contract between state and citizenry and are providing key opportunities to build more inclusive and equitable societies.

At the same time, these same technologies are being employed by autocratic states and conflict actors for sophisticated methods of censorship, surveillance and dis/misinformation, which are creating new divisions and inciting violence that can manifest itself offline. Hate speech, recruitment for terrorism, fake news, disinformation campaigns, privacy breaches, and other challenges to peaceful societies are increasingly dominating political and media narratives, reinforcing popular perceptions of technology as untrustworthy and dangerous. This has also led to unhelpful or harmful legislation and regulation around the use of technology that are further exacerbating existing ‘digital divides’ and inhibiting the rights and freedoms of individual users and civil society actors.

In response to these dynamics, the use of technology for peace, otherwise known as ‘peacetech’, has grown in prominence over the last decade and has generated innovative tech-based solutions to tackle drivers of conflict and insecurity. In effect, digital technologies provide peacebuilders with user-friendly, efficient and scalable tools that not only improve programming and communications, but can also create alternative infrastructures for peace – challenging dominant conflict narratives and fostering positive communication and social cohesion between conflict groups. Yet despite this progress and growing interest from policymakers and donors, many questions remain and are still being debated around the strategic use of tech for peace.

As peacebuilders place more importance on the use of digital technologies to sustain peacebuilding work in this midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, outstanding questions on how to best capitalise on the opportunities for peace that digital technologies provide require further insight and knowledge-sharing.

This report presents the findings of a global online consultation Peace Direct held with peacebuilding practitioners and academics who employ digital technologies in their work. The purpose of this exchange was to unpack different local perspectives on the role that technology plays in peacebuilding, to share learnings, experiences and effective tech-based peacebuilding approaches, and to contribute to policy and practice discussions around the effective use of technology for peace. The result was a robust discussion that sheds further light on the intersection between technology and peacebuilding, and demonstrates the adaptive and inventive ways that peacebuilders continue to prevent and resolve conflict – both online and offline.

Key findings

The three-day consultation explored the novel and innovative ways that local peacebuilding practitioners and academics advance peace through technology. Though not exhaustive, below are a range of effective tech-based strategies employed by peacebuilders, identified in this report:

- Peacebuilders are crowdsourcing information and utilising mobile and satellite technologies for data collection, to map out detailed conflict trends and hotspots on the ground. This has vastly improved early warnings systems, enabling systematic and near real-time data to be shared, which has greatly reduced the time needed for critical responses.
- Social media platforms, blogs, podcasts and online forums are being used to promote peace, through messaging and storytelling. This has built awareness around peace in a systematic way by connecting users to relatable themes and individuals with lived experiences of conflict.
- Peacebuilders have also been able to tap into large and powerful online communities, where they help to foster open and inclusive spaces to share knowledge, mobilise for peace, and drive social change. In these spaces, new partnerships and networks for collective action are formed.
- Peacebuilders are increasingly utilising advanced technologies, including ‘big data’, artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain programmes to collect data, as well as interactive technologies such as virtual reality and videogames to more actively engage people in peacebuilding.
- Peacebuilders have adopted a “hybrid” approach in their activities, marrying online and offline technologies to maximise their reach and minimise risks of exclusion and counter-productive programming. Their adeptness in switching between analogue and digital tools has made them adaptable to difficult environments and tuned in to local realities.

Despite the benefits that technology provides, local peacebuilders in fragile and conflict-affected contexts continue to face intersecting issues that are creating digital divides and reproducing fault lines which can lead to violence – ultimately undermining their peacebuilding work:

- Structural barriers such as poverty, weak infrastructure and low digital literacy – critical enablers for socio-economic transformation – are preventing large segments of the global population from accessing digital technologies. Poor infrastructure development, prohibitive costs and a lack of accessibility and training have contributed to widening social inequalities that are leaving many behind.
- These digital divides are disproportionately affecting marginalised groups such as women and minorities. Underlying gendered norms and power imbalances replicated in online spaces have translated into continued harassment and targeting by spoilers and trolls, further undermining these groups’ representation in online platforms.
- Restrictive regulatory and policy environments – characterised by censorship, surveillance and sporadic internet shutdowns – are threatening users’ freedom and rights, and are contributing to shrinking civil society space.
- The use of technology for peace comes with complex ethical, privacy and security challenges that can replicate power imbalances and conflict dynamics in digital environments. Preventing this requires testing assumptions and determining the appropriateness of introducing technology in a conflict- and context-sensitive manner.
- Evidence gaps and sustainability issues around the use of technology for peacebuilding require further documentation around potential design biases, as well as staff training and capacity-building, to improve the overall impact of tech-based peacebuilding interventions.

Recommendations

For governments and international bodies

- **Promote digital literacy and e-governance programmes to support digital inclusion in online spaces and in tech-based peacebuilding activities.** Governments and international bodies should develop accessible e-governance and digital literacy programmes that will support online civic participation and educate users on data privacy and healthy digital environments. These programmes should also include regional language groups to provide greater access to local communities around the world.
- **Strengthen human rights-compliant regulatory practices on digital platforms.** Governments and technology companies should ensure that any regulation balances protecting individuals' sensitive data and preventing the prevalence of misinformation, hate speech and inflammatory messages. Government and private sector initiatives to improve transparency and accountability around content regulation should be done in consultation with human rights experts and peacebuilding experts, who are best placed to work around the challenges of specifically defined hate speech and inflammatory language. In addition, resources must be provided for stakeholders who cannot afford or cannot access the consultations.

For donors, funders and civil society

- **Increase support for tech-based peacebuilding initiatives at the local level.** Donors should provide material support and training to local civil society which would enable effective tech-based peacebuilding initiatives to scale up in size. Flexible funding can help to develop staff capacity and digital literacy while covering various licensing, data storage and server costs.
- **Document and analyse the applications of digital technologies in conflict-affected settings, with lessons captured and shared effectively.** It is vital that civil society actors and donors tackle M&E design biases behind tech-based solutions and provide effective solutions to the issues faced by peacebuilders and beneficiary communities using technology, more in line with a user-centred and participatory approach.
- **Develop and strengthen online civil society networks to expand effective peacebuilding campaigns and outreach.** Where civil society organisations can rally behind a unified agenda, they can show their collective strength in order to elevate peacebuilding in the digital space. Collective action can strengthen alternative narratives and help foster a wider digital culture of peace. Donors should strengthen and support such efforts as well as the civil society networks behind them.

About Peace Direct

Peace Direct works with local people to stop violence and build sustainable peace. We believe that local people should lead all peacebuilding efforts, and this report is the latest in a series canvassing local views on violent conflicts around the world in an effort to highlight local capacities for peace and local expertise.

For more information on this series of reports, please contact us.

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