Can we build peace from a distance?

The impact of COVID-19 on the peacebuilding sector

Peace
is within
our power

Executive summary

This background paper explores some of the ways in which the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has disrupted one of the foundation principles of peacebuilding practice: the basic need to bring people together face-to-face.

It takes a step back to look at the overall impact on peacebuilding practice when intergroup contact is limited, encouraging an examination of the principles that underpin practice.

The paper shines a spotlight on how trust and the creation of safe spaces is inherently challenged by a shift online, where sensitive issues and information are at greater risk. The transition of peace dialogue and mediation to the virtual sphere is an example of the inadequacies of online engagement. Ordinarily, peacebuilding is a process underpinned by long-term trust building through face-to-face engagement, and previous progress risks unravelling unless physical spaces are reinforced alongside digital ones.

The question of who has access to the digital world and who does not is critical. For some constituencies, such as young people, the move online has expanded the space to engage and is an opportunity to be at the core of shaping future resilient societies.

Yet, for others, existing power dynamics have simply been extended to the online space – with those who have connectivity holding a new form of power. Better-resourced and -connected organisations and communities are better positioned to access decision-making forums. Digital consultations are often gender blind, with little exploration to date to understand the gender impacts of a shift online. Access to (or lack of) connectivity risks exacerbating conflict, driving inequalities and grievances.

A positive consequence of changing practice is that the localisation agenda can finally be realised. Peacebuilders living in conflict places have not had the luxury of stopping their work. In many places, efforts to build peace have never paused. The greatest change has been in the grounding of staff based in the 'global north', which has increased momentum towards the localisation of peacebuilding, including transition of responsibility for project implementation to local staff or commissioning new local partners to continue the delivery of services to communities. This opens the space for a long-awaited examination of what is needed to shift the focus to local expertise. However, this is not without complexity, and considerations such as the transfer of risk to local organisations and a testing of donor appetite to continue to support this work should be at the forefront of the discussion.

The sector needs to work together to navigate these challenges; to advocate for the most equitable ways forward; and to ensure that efforts to adapt do not inadvertently contribute to conflict and fragility but place peacebuilding at the very centre.

This paper will be accompanied by a forthcoming report, *Peace as a key priority in post-COVID recovery*, which offers institutionally focused recommendations for continued meaningful investment in peacebuilding.[1]

Introduction

International Alert, along with other peacebuilding actors and organisations, has been impacted by COVID-19 in the implementation of its peacebuilding work around the world. COVID-19 and government responses to it have presented challenges to the design, implementation and monitoring of the peacebuilding world globally.

This background paper highlights some of these challenges and identifies potential opportunities that these changes have created for the peacebuilding sector. It underscores the importance of peacebuilding in contexts where the shocks of COVID-19 overlay, and exacerbate, other conflict-inducing dynamics. Without peacebuilding at the centre, any response will at best be inadequate, missing opportunities to address conflict factors, and at worst do harm.

COVID-19, conflict and peacebuilding

COVID-19 has forced adaptations in the ways that peacebuilders think and work worldwide. With disruptions in international and domestic travel, local and national lockdowns and the need for social distancing, transnational and local peacebuilders have been confined to working from home, and limited to virtual meetings with stakeholders, community groups, peers and partners, disrupting "the pattern of work that peacebuilding organisations have developed over decades".[2]

With disruptions in international and domestic travel, local and national lockdowns and the need for social distancing, transnational and local peacebuilders are now relying on virtual meetings with stakeholders, community groups, peers and partners.

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The impact of the pandemic has serious implications for those caught in the midst of conflict. It has exacerbated existing conflicts and spurred new ones. Humanitarian aid, ongoing peace processes and peacebuilding efforts[3] have been severely affected. Access to communities and individuals most affected by conflict has been disrupted, in some cases removing vital support services and increasing vulnerability. In the early days of COVID-19, donors and peacebuilding organisations alike were unsure how to navigate the restrictions of the pandemic while continuing vital work that supports those in need. Given this severity, the peacebuilding sector pivoted in favour of adapting peacebuilding practices to transition to building peace remotely where face-to-face engagement was not possible. National-level, regional and international peacebuilding staff remain grounded and unable to travel, while trying to support peacebuilding efforts from a distance. While remote working has always been a part of the practice, for the first time it was no longer supplementary to direct contact but instead became the primary form of a number of interventions.

Such a transition helps fulfil the immediate need to maintain a presence and to continue to operate. Some of these adaptations have been met with praise. There is reportedly greater youth involvement through the use of technology and stronger online tracking of peace talks. The grounding of staff based in the 'global north' has increased momentum towards the localisation of peacebuilding, including transition of responsibility for project implementation to local staff or commissioning new local partners to continue the delivery of services to communities. The sharing of information data, the development of networks, coordination and division of work have been better facilitated by digital platforms, with some organisations reporting the emergence of an increased willingness to share data within the sector.[4]

However, there are voices of concern. In a sector built on the fundamental premise of contact between individuals and groups, what, for example, is the impact of remote peacebuilding on access, elite[5] capture, safe spaces and confidentiality?

While not exhaustive, this paper outlines some of the challenges to peacebuilding in the face of COVID-19 along with the challenges inherent in these adaptations from a theoretical and ethical point of view. Given the unknown future of these adaptations, it is critical to understand the dilemmas presented (and continue to problematise and flag

others that exist), support conflict- and gender-sensitive adaptations of peacebuilding practices, and advocate for the most equitable way forward to relevant stakeholders. This will help ensure that our COVID-19 adaptations are not contributing to conflict and fragility, but are instead building towards more sustainable, peace-supporting impacts in the places we work.

Our forthcoming report, *Peace as a key priority in post-COVID recovery*, will offer institutionally focused recommendations for continued meaningful investment in peacebuilding.[6]

Exacerbating conflict dynamics

The COVID-19 pandemic is widely considered the most critical global health calamity of the century.[7] To date, there have been over 67.5 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including more than 1.5 million deaths, in over 200 countries throughout the world.[8] Countries are struggling to curb transmission rates despite extensive testing and treating of patients. Measures infringing human liberties, previously unseen on this scale, are now widely in place across many countries, including quarantining of suspected infected persons, surveillance through contact tracing, restrictions on gatherings, and maintaining complete or partial lockdowns.[9]

Secondary socio-economic impacts associated with the pandemic and lockdown measures are likely to have an even greater impact, both exacerbating and creating new conflict. For example, in Ethiopia, we have seen COVID-19 slow economic growth, contribute to rising debt risks and inflation, and increase already high rates of unemployment, in particular, in the informal labour market.[10] As a result, we have witnessed vulnerable populations with unmet basic needs and greater gulfs in inequality in already unequal societies. The pandemic and its responses are therefore occurring alongside other political, social, economic and military crises in places like Ethiopia, where unrest has complicated the distribution of humanitarian supplies, leading the UN to now warn of the onset of a "full-scale humanitarian crisis".[11]

Globally, there has been a trend towards a centralisation of state power to enforce social isolation measures, placing continued strain on the trust and social contract between states and citizens. This has exacerbated human rights violations and government abuses, especially within already divided fragile and conflict-affected countries.[12] There is a particular gender bias in vulnerability, with women as caregivers and frontline healthcare workers bearing the brunt of caring responsibility in many contexts, together with the added burden of educating children from home.[13] A global surge in domestic violence[14] demonstrates the hidden vulnerabilities and risks of increased isolation through lockdown, for women in particular, and highlights the multiple levels of risk in the public and private sphere.

The risk of violent conflict is likely to increase as the virus continues to spread. Marginalised groups across different contexts both in the 'global north' and 'global south'[15] have been the most impacted by many of the stringent measures taken to control the virus. Restrictive controls on populations and limited access to resources place a heavy strain on the social order, and virus-prevention measures have turned violent in some places.[16] Physical distancing and blaming of 'the other' for the spread of the virus increases existing tensions between groups and undermines the fragile social fabric.[17] This is further threatened by the unfolding economic impacts of the virus and societies' mounting frustration and lack of trust in their governments' response and management of the pandemic.[18]

In such contexts, peacebuilding is as important as ever. Yet peacebuilding programmes, processes and dialogues have been disrupted, postponed and cancelled.[19] For local peacebuilders, social distancing is undermining many existing peacebuilding efforts, which rely on in-person gatherings,[20] consequently disrupting inter- and intra-community mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution. This has left a vacuum, which, in some places, such as Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Libya and South Sudan, has been filled by armed groups and an increase in local violence.[21] The limitations and restrictions put in place to manage the pandemic pose significant challenges to the work of peacebuilders around the world – in both theoretical and practical ways.

Limited intergroup contact and the efficacy of peacebuilding impacts

Contact hypothesis and intergroup contact theory is one critical anchor underpinning key assumptions and principles that guide peacebuilding activities.[22] Peacebuilders work on the assumption that differences in values and interests can be resolved cooperatively among conflict groups through positive negotiation and mediation. Collaborative problem solving is a means to encourage conflict parties to jointly address problems, past and present traumas, and explore new and nonviolent options to overcome differences. This offers the opportunity to reconcile competing versions of the past and acknowledge perceived historical injustices through ongoing dialogue, mediation and problem solving.

There is a particular gender bias in vulnerability to the pandemic, with women more often caregivers and frontline healthcare workers, together with the added burden of educating children from home and a global surge in domestic violence.

Peacebuilding processes assume that change in people, relationships and systems is possible and necessary to resolve conflicts.[23] All these assumptions are interwoven with the concept of 'human connectiveness' where people are brought together to tell their stories, histories and experiences as a means to attain transformative peace.[24]

While intergroup contact theory is not without its limitations,[25] it nevertheless remains the primary approach, and it has overriding positive benefits of peacebuilding and trust building among conflict parties. Workshops, dialogue, mediation, trainings, consultations, focus group discussions and all activities that involve bringing people together are the primary part of many peacebuilding approaches. Bringing people face-to-face, within and across communities, to jointly plan, design and implement processes are the cornerstone of peacebuilding. These approaches are most effective when they are sustained and combined with multi-track change advocacy and engagement. Online, or digital, engagement has historically supplemented or supported such face-to-face engagement. This has now been turned on its head, with the primary form of contact instead being mediated through the online world, and peacebuilding organisations in many cases shifting to virtual forums to continue operations.[26]

What is clear is that COVID-19 is challenging its epistemological basis of intergroup contact theory. If this becomes the status quo, we will need to consider the impact of this shift on peacebuilding – what we lose when we remove human contact, and what we gain.

Challenges for adaptions to peacebuilding

This section outlines several peacebuilding challenges that COVID-19 has raised. While it is not exhaustive, given the numerous challenges the field is facing at present, we have selected these issues to illustrate how COVID-19 is testing the efficacy of the peacebuilding sector.

Peace dialogues and mediation in the virtual sphere

Peace negotiations, peace dialogues and peace mediation are peacebuilding practices deeply rooted in intergroup contact theory, which are now being challenged by the shift to virtual spaces. These efforts at conflict resolution

rely heavily on face-to-face interaction to build trust and consensus that contributes to sustainable peace. Despite a call by the UN Secretary-General in March of this year for a global ceasefire in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the support of 170 states, this has produced limited success.[27] Yemen, along with other countries such as Colombia and the Philippines, which initially declared ceasefires (the ELN in Colombia, the CPP-NPA in the Philippines and Joint Coalition in Yemen), have since failed to extend them due to COVID-19 restrictions on the face-to-face meeting of conflicting parties. It is as important as ever to find ways to continue to hold open channels for dialogue and spaces for mediation. Therefore, some track 1.5 and track 2 mediation processes and negotiations have moved to online platforms. For example, the Yemen Peace Track Initiative (a coalition of more than 250 Yemeni women within and outside of the country using WhatsApp, Twitter and other digital platforms) continues to track ceasefire negotiations and engage in online consultations with the United Nations. However, practitioners at UNESCO and USIP are problematising the level of success that a dialogue started online, with no prior trust-building engagement, can achieve.[28]

This is because the process of bringing people to the table for dialogue is not merely a practical one of getting people from opposing sides to sit together, but one in which the very process requires, and builds, trust and engagement. This is critical especially where the conflict is volatile and protracted.[29] It also carries an important psychological dimension where attitudes and behaviours may become embedded deeper than individual actions. International Alert faced this challenge in the South Caucasus, where we experienced greater difficulty in bringing new participants together online from across conflict divides because the preparatory trust-building process of intergroup contact, which serves to overcome prejudice and stereotype and create some measure of confidence and safety, had not been possible due to travel restrictions.[30] Trying to conduct dialogue online was incomparable to being face-to-face. However, with other types of activities, such as training and capability building, where there was a high level of previous engagement and trust between partners, we found engaging online to be fairly straightforward. Two common-sense implications emerge: both the nature of pre-existing relationships and the type of activity or process in hand (and its relative sensitivity vis-à-vis articulation of perspectives on conflict issues) are key factors determining the level of success when transitioning online.

Trust, confidentiality and safe spaces

The issue of trust is intimately linked with some of the ethical considerations around online engagement. At the forefront of this is how safe and secure the online space is.[31] Alert's recent report on realising the potential of social media as a tool for building peace highlighted the ethical challenges of privacy, consent and cyber-security concerns.[32] Security breaches such as those experienced by the popular meeting platform Zoom, where uninvited guests joined video conferences, in some cases shouting abuse, sharing pornography or making racist and homophobic remarks,[33] highlight some of the dangers of discussing sensitive issues online and the difficulties that may then ensue in building trust to enable open and honest conversation.

Even with closed password-protected meetings, there is still a risk that sensitive information, either relating to the profiles of the participants or key discussion points, can be leaked to third parties, which may place participants at risk. This is particularly pertinent in states where individuals engaged in peacebuilding activities are at risk of heightened surveillance, and when engaging with individuals and communities in vulnerable situations, such as members of political factions or the LGBTQ+ community, or when holding discussions around sensitive topics. As some governments exploit the crisis to further restrict civil society space and increase authoritarian measures,[34] the shift to peacebuilding activity online brings it far more directly under the sphere of control of states, with direct consequences for the personal safety of peacebuilders. Ensuring safe online spaces is therefore of the utmost ethical concern and a prerequisite for successful transition to online peacebuilding activity that requires much more investigation by peacebuilders.[35]

A recent discussion on remote data collection on violence against women (VAW) convened by UNICEF made the point that, although data had been "safely collected over the phone, internet and other remote methods before (e.g. Argentina, Canada, United States), these have primarily been undertaken in high income countries (HICs) – and without the added survey logistical challenges imposed by COVID-19".[36] In addition, in these cases, the expert panel advised that collecting such sensitive data using remote methods, without due diligence and safeguards, may pose real safety risks for the participants, and recommended excluding direct questions on VAW experience within population-based rapid assessments.[37] The risks identified

with collecting data on VAW and SGBV in view of the restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic potentially could mean that the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised within contexts where peacebuilding work is taking place will be even more challenging to meet.

Furthermore, digital consultations are often gender blind, with no apparent push towards exploring the gendered impacts of online solutions.[38] In addition to the digital gender bias regarding access in many contexts curtailing women's and girls' ability to benefit from the opportunities offered by the digital transformation,[39] ground that has been won in gender-mainstreaming face-to-face consultation processes risks being lost in the digital transition. Particular effort needs to be made to bring gender back into any consultation topic, starting with the design and methodology.

Lastly, the safeguarding of children (boys and girls under 18) in, for example, peace education programmes, and children associated with armed forces and armed groups' (CAAFAG) social cohesion efforts, is of particular concern where activities transition online. Online engagement reduces the number of safeguarding measures that can be put in place to protect the identity and anonymity of minors. The shift to more digital work may also unconsciously reduce our targeting of children if we cannot find more appropriate safeguarding measures that are fit for the purpose of online engagement. Consequently, children, who are often heavily affected by conflict, will have less of a presence in peacebuilding and conflict-resolution efforts, and be marginalised from being part of building youth capacity to lead to a more peaceful future.

Who is at the virtual table? Elite capture, access and marginalisation

In addition to the challenges raised above, issues of elite capture continue to present challenges to the peacebuilding sector as it adapts to the online realities that COVID-19 has created. Elite capture, defined in this context as "situations where elites shape development according to their own priorities and/or appropriate development resources for private gain",[40] manifests itself in multiple ways. This also relates to humanitarian and peacebuilding processes. These can include, most obviously, the question of who is invited to conferences based on access to obtaining visas, speaking globally dominant languages, such as English or French, and having access to flexible travel funds to pay for accommodation or air travel. COVID-19 minimised some of these dynamics due to travel restrictions. We have also seen cases in which online working has opened up opportunities

to participate for previously marginalised or excluded groups or individuals (i.e. they do not need to acquire visas, do not need to leave their home country and family obligations, etc.). However, this shift to a virtual table unfortunately has not eradicated this power dynamic but simply shifted and extended many of these power and access dynamics to online spaces. This feature of the peacebuilding sector's COVID-19 adaptation to the online space risks exacerbating existing inequalities and further marginalising groups from peacebuilding opportunities.

As more engagements and activities move online, the "digital divide"[41] only deepens. Those with connectivity hold power: to engage, to influence, to have their voice heard. Those without connectivity or digital literacy risk being further marginalised. For example, poor internet connectivity and intermittent electricity supply run the risk of facilitating elite capture, where having access to technology is commensurate with knowledge and expertise.

Connectivity itself becomes currency in the sector and is prioritised over other factors. In some cases, while searching for participants in virtual panels, conveners request that those put forward for participation have steady internet access. This widens the digital divide by negatively impacting conflict-affected and marginalised groups, which do not have reliable internet access or access to equipment or digital literacy. A rapid desk review on digital consultations[42] found a bias towards inviting contributions from what are often referred to as 'expert-level' participants, such as international non-governmental organisation (INGO), governmental and multilateral-level actors, rather than 'community-level' participants, or grassroots local community constituencies, again leading to the silencing of marginalised voices, including civil society actors. Some of the prerequisite skills that might be required of participants, such as knowledge of the dominant language of communication, the right CV, work experience, career trajectory and steady internet connection – all factors related to some level of privilege – are unattainable for many people. One expert argues that, for peacebuilding organisations, providing free internet connectivity is likely to be a major development and peacebuilding priority in the coming months and years.[43]

In countries such as South Sudan – where connectivity is a major problem – INGOs have established internet cafés so that people can access the internet and use social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to communicate.[44] In response to the pandemic and the restriction of movement, Alert's programming team has adapted its media and peacebuilding working to develop targeted messages

Young people taking part in our project to ensure more youth-friendly healthcare services in Tunisia, as part of a wider effort to address the marginalisation of young people in the country. This includes them using an interactive mobile app to assess healthcare facilities.

for groups in vulnerable situations, such as IDPs who are at a higher risk of infections due to the conditions in the camps.[45]

While some of these practices have met donor requirements for the continuation of activities, the lack of in-person interaction between groups that this digital shift has created, who is comfortable with using online platforms and who is not, and who is left out of digital engagement brings into question whether or not these new ways of working can, or will, produce desired results, especially over time. The very adaptations to the digital world are, therefore, fraught with challenges, which risk creating or exacerbating conflict-driving inequalities and grievances.

Opportunities for adaptions to peacebuilding

Despite the challenges, there are also opportunities to be seized in our COVID-19 adaptations. We do not yet know the full extent of COVID-19's impact on communities, states and the global system; however, the following examples illustrate how COVID-19 may present new openings for the peacebuilding sector, which could strengthen its efficacy in the long run.

Harnessing the voices of young people

As more organisations shift their core peacebuilding work to digital spaces, questions of who has access and who is marginalised from these spaces are being raised. Search for Common Ground have noted that this shift towards the digital implementation of peacebuilding practices has positively positioned young people (who are typically ahead in their grasp of technology) at the front and centre of conflict-sensitive pandemic responses.[46] This puts young peacebuilders at the core of shaping more resilient societies, playing a "leadership role in preventing violence, training their communities and innovating new peacebuilding technologies".[47]

The drive for youth participation is grounded in global efforts to increase youth engagement in peacebuilding more generally, including UN Resolution 2250. COVID-19 and our increasing reliance on technology in our peacebuilding work may be an additional driver for enhancing youth participation, creating an inadvertent but in this respect welcome response to the bigger picture of high levels of interest among young people themselves for greater inclusion and participation in peacebuilding. Participation in online dialogue presupposes willingness, interest, and social or professional networks to do so. While use of tech

may be more attractive, or easier, for younger people, we still need to build a baseline of willingness and ability to participate in peacebuilding activities if it is to be effective and widespread. For a group (in all its diversity) that has historically been 'othered' and marginalised on the shared basis of its perceived immaturity, these online adaptations to peacebuilding might offer an opportunity to diversify the seats at the table and include more young voices in decision-making and peacebuilding spaces.

While the potential for raising the voices of young people is clearly welcomed, we should sound a cautionary note. Older demographics, who might have less access to and knowledge of technological platforms, should not be overlooked – or else we risk a technological generation gap, which could potentially lead to the marginalisation of these voices. It is imperative that young people are not treated as a homogeneous group. Peacebuilding organisations need to consider and address inequalities between youth groups in terms of access to technology and digital literacy. Finally, creating online platforms for young people should not remove their access to decision-makers (typically represented by an older generation) and, thereby, still exclude youth from decision-making taking place in separate forums.

Localising peacebuilding

A further opportunity that the COVID-19 pandemic may have created is increased momentum towards the 'localisation' of peacebuilding. In practice, this means INGOs supporting locally led approaches by championing local agency and challenging existing unequal power structures.[48] Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cessation or pausing of peacebuilding activities is an option open only to donors and INGOs. For local actors, continuing to engage in peacebuilding is as much of a life or death issue as COVID-19, if not even more so. Many have not paused their efforts, even when formal programmes were put on hold. Within peacebuilding, development and humanitarian sectors, there has been an emphasis over the years on moving more systematically towards local peacebuilding and local ownership, although "empowering local peacebuilders was still something that international or national-level peacebuilders did for local peacebuilders".[49]

With the impact of COVID-19 disrupting conventional models of carrying out peacebuilding work, particularly the grounding of international staff and advisers, national NGOs and implementing partners of INGOs in the 'global south' are better positioned to continue peacebuilding at a time when international travel is so heavily restricted.[50]

"[Due to restrictions brought about by the pandemic] National and local peacebuilders may finally get the peacebuilding space to themselves. COVID-19 has provided us with an opportunity to truly build and strengthen national and local capacities for peace. International support can be provided from a digital distance, and national and local actors can, for the first time, truly have the room to self-organise. In some cases, this means that the national and local offices of international NGOs are now managed exclusively by national staff."[51]

Raj Kumar, from Devex, adds that "for a community of professionals who see travel as essential to their work [already a marker of value and social status] but who are also sensitive to the elitist and neo-colonial undertones to all the shuttling around, this would be a mixed bag and a major cultural and operational shift".[52] One benefit to this is the reduction in CO2 global aviation emissions during the lockdown – a trend that the sector should work hard to uphold.[53] Meanwhile, a survey of local peacebuilding initiatives by Peace Direct found that local peacebuilders have been actively adapting their work to respond to the crisis, using their contextual knowledge of conflict dynamics and roots in their communities to promote measures to combat the virus, deliver supplies to the most needy, and keep communication open among communities to maintain social cohesion in the midst of physical distancing.[54]

We have seen this changing dynamic in a number of places we work. While such a shift is immensely positive, it does also mean that local peacebuilding organisations are likely to shoulder more health and safety risks without the back-up of an international community.

There is also the risk of creating inequalities among local CSOs where digital engagement favours those that are more established and better connected, and more technologically savvy but not necessarily fully representative. Grassroots organisations are less likely to have any kind of visibility. Therefore, it is imperative that, in pushing the localisation agenda, we are sensitive to local dynamics and inequalities and make sure that our efforts are bringing as many voices into the fold as possible. Localisation should create more equitable partnerships between international and national/local organisations, rather than expand the distance, harnessing processes that are genuinely participatory and mutually beneficial, as highlighted by the Inclusive Peace in Practice Initiative (IPIP).[55] Local peacebuilders are asking for support from international donors and organisations for flexible funding to help build capacity of technologies and

tools to continue building community cohesion and resilience, including increased internet access, cell-phone time, radio programming and other communications tools.[56] While there have been initial moves towards greater donor flexibility in the ratio of staff costs to implementation costs for example, there is still much to do to create the level of flexibility that programmes and organisations will need to survive.

It remains to be seen whether there will be sustained donor appetite to fundamentally change the mode of peacebuilding funding and partnerships built up over the years and create a financially viable space for local peacebuilders to take the lead, with technical and technological support being provided by INGOs.

Conclusion

We have adapted rapidly as a sector to COVID-19 and have endeavoured to continue to make the case and carve the space for peacebuilding among the competing priorities caused by the pandemic. We have seen opportunities come out of this adaptation, such as the chance to address global inequalities along age and gender demographic lines with the shift to a more virtual world. However, the ethical challenges that the digital peacebuilding world presents should not be overlooked. Assumptions are being made about the protection of the most vulnerable at present, and the risks to their safety and security are not yet fully understood. If we do not pause and contemplate the selection biases in online engagement, we risk facilitating greater elite capture and further marginalising groups in need. If we do not review our privacy procedures for workshops and dialogues, we may jeopardise the safety and security of partners in the field who are in vulnerable situations. If we do not consider the power asymmetry between 'global north' and 'global south' in terms of access to the internet, we may reinforce inequalities of participation and voice of those where conflict-resolution practices are needed the most.

Regardless of whether, or not, this mode of operation is the new normal, we need to examine this way of working and its implications for our methodologies more critically. We must work together as a peacebuilding sector to create our own path to navigate these challenges; to support conflict- and gender-sensitive adaptations of peacebuilding practices among ourselves and the development and humanitarian actors; to advocate for the most equitable ways forward; and to ensure that our efforts to adapt do not inadvertently contribute to conflict and fragility but place peacebuilding at the very centre.

Acknowledgements

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