Geneva Peace Week 2022 Thematic Track Report

Digital peace: The Power and Limits of Innovation in Peacebuilding

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1. Overview

This year's digital track was under the theme "Digital peace: The Power and Limits of Innovation in Peacebuilding". As the title suggests, it intended to take the conversation on digital peacebuilding towards an engagement with the limits of innovation that peacebuilders face when adapting digital approaches. Nonetheless, among the event organisers, a strong focus remained on digital solutions that can help tackle the negative effects of digitalisation. The track featured three in-person workshops, five online workshops and five digital series items. The high-level roundtable explored the need and practical options to **take digital peacebuilding beyond a mere focus on the digital realm and the negative or positive effects of technology**, and towards a concern with how successful digital peacebuilding ultimately depends on humans, society and politics.

The various events were driven by at least three major concerns. A first concern was with how to **respond to the malevolent use of technologies on social media, especially how to detect and respond to misinformation, disinformation, and dangerous speech on social media**, as well as how to promote counter speech and positive social media content. A second concern was with how to **provide a safe environment for online engagements** and the use of digital technology in conflict-affected contexts, including through technological innovation, user sensitisation and risk assessments and monitoring. And a third major concern was with how to **promote the good use of technology, among conflict parties, conflict stakeholders but also third parties and peacebuilders,** including through enhancing regulation, ethics-driven approaches, and negotiating codes of conduct or social media peace agreements.

2. Key Insights & Takeaways

The first insight of this year's Digital Track is that many organizations have strengthened their efforts to make digital engagements safer. This has become a priority against the backdrop of increased cyberattacks, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and infrastructural vulnerability in the current geopolitical climate. For instance, if left unaddressed in mediated peace processes, the spreading of mis- and disinformation on social media can undermine peace mediation or peacebuilding efforts by deepening conflict lines, delegitimizing peace talks, and undermining peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts. In response, the sector has developed practical tools that help

to enhance cyber security and digital hygiene. For instance, members of the Cybermediation network have designed an online course that helps mediators and facilitators to take the necessary steps to create a safe online environment.

The second insight is that **while we see a proliferation of efforts to fight the negative effects of digitalization and particularly social media**, **peacebuilding actors also increasingly grapple with the limits of digital approaches**. For instance, efforts to automate the detection of hate speech on social media have progressed for languages other than English, but the reliability and accuracy of machine learning models is still so low that human oversight is necessary. On the other hand, peacebuilding actors are becoming better equipped to measure the impact of digital technologies, such as algorithms flagging toxic speech, or online content helping to humanize former combatants. However, structural and systemic deficits remain. For instance, digital peacebuilding ecosystems have been built without a systematic view on the gender inequalities and gendered violence that digital infrastructures often reproduce.

The third insight is that **digital peacebuilding efforts will only be effective if they take the social and human dimensions of peace and conflict into account.** There is a risk that digital interventions are driven by a "tech-solutionist" attitude that promotes digital tools as answers to challenges that often remain social and political in nature. Therefore, the discussions stressed that digital approaches must remain human-centred and fitted to local context. In addition, the events and discussion stressed the need to take multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches involving research, policy and practice, such as to build psychological resistance against mis- and disinformation. A further potential answer are multi-stakeholder alliances that help peacebuilding actors leverage computer- and data science, peace- and conflict scholars, regional and local expertise, as the capacities of the private sector. There is also an increased need to develop thinking tools and knowledge that can support the regulation of digital technology, negotiate codes of conduct for conflict parties and third parties, make cost-benefit and risk assessments, identify appropriate responses, and foster the good use of technology by peacebuilders, conflict parties, and stakeholders.

3. Conclusions and Next Steps

In the current global environment, policy and practice concerns with digital technologies will continue to be with secure online/digital environments and with countering the malevolent use of technology. However, there is a **risk that an exclusive concern with these challenges will reduce the scope of possible digital approaches,** focusing on how to contain the negative consequences of digitalisation rather than focusing on its

potential. While security-driven and reactive activities are undeniably relevant, **more efforts should be spent on asking about how digital technologies can support conflict prevention and conflict transformation in a more holistic, comprehensive and structured manner.**

Therefore, a productive way forward would be to explore digital peacebuilding approaches in relation to specific peacebuilding objectives **that have transformative potential**, such as the empowerment of marginalized groups or stakeholders, the tackling of global injustice and racism. Topics that are worthwhile to explore are how digital peacebuilding initiatives can be linked to long-term, structural and sustainable social and political change, how digital approaches can enable meaningful dialogue, empathy and understanding, and how digital peacebuilding can build partnerships with (digital) social movements and networks that tackle systemic global inequalities and injustice.