Geneva Peace Week 2021 Thematic Track Report

Harnessing the digital sphere for peace

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Geneva Peace Week 2021 (GPW21) took place from 1-5 November 2021, featuring Online Workshops and a Digital Series that focused on four main thematic tracks. This report will summarize the key emerging insights from the 5 workshops and 6 digital series offerings within the thematic track, *"Harnessing the digital sphere for peace"*.

In the course of the past years, many peacebuilding organizations have sought to build active partnerships, including with the private sector and PeaceTech organizations or labs, and now have first-hand experiences with digital peacebuilding. Moving beyond curiosity or skepticism about digital approaches, practitioners now concretely ask about their added value and possible negative effects of integrating digital technologies into their projects. Consequently, the discussions in the various sessions have also become more fine-grained and focused, with concrete questions about how to enable partnerships between peacebuilding organizations, new digital peacebuilding or "PeaceTech" initiatives, the private sector and technology experts taking centre stage.

Multiplicity of Use Cases and Approaches. One of the key insights that emerged from the overall programme was that digital technologies can be harnessed in manifold ways for peacebuilding, and that comprehensive and integrated approaches are necessary to have a lasting impact. Some sessions discussed the use of advanced and highly complex technologies, such as to leverage satellite or social media data to analyse vulnerabilities and conflict forecasting. However, others pointed to the benefits of traditional technologies that may not be as hyped, but still play an important role for information and disinformation in many countries, including radio and television. Some sessions continued the discussion on efforts to use digital technology to counter the negative effects of digitalization, especially to fight hate speech, disinformation and misinformation that often stand in the way of building peace. While this requires intervening on social media, to debunk misinformation and shape narratives, many participants also stressed that such efforts also require investing more broadly in digital infrastructures and digital literacy, to increase capacities for digital peacebuilding. Yet, other contributions also stressed the need to support deeper work, such as on the psychological and cultural factors that strengthen the risk that social media is used as a weapon in conflict. For instance, it may not suffice to merely run 'fact checks', but there is a need to change the mind-sets of those who spread disinformation. The community should also take note of the role of digital activism, digital arts, and creative uses of digital technologies to enable peaceful resistance and protest.

Limits of Technology and Keeping "Humans in the Loop". Several sessions made clear that digital technologies are neither a silver bullet for peacebuilding, nor that they can operate independently from human peacebuilding efforts. Discussions on the role of Artificial Intelligence expressed skepticism as to the scope of applications of AI-systems, as well as their ability to work independently from those who design and use them. While a lot of progress has been made for instance in Machine Learning, existing applications have relatively "narrow" intelligence and thus can only carry out very specific tasks. In addition, the availability of appropriate data that can provide insights about conflict contexts constitutes a practical hurdle for the utilization of such technologies. Where quantitative data is available, there also usually remains a need to contextualise and interpret machine-generated outputs through qualitative data and expert knowledge. This makes realistic assessments of the added value of tech-based approaches, which is necessary to clearly determine where digital technologies can contribute to human peacebuilding efforts, and where, when and how humans must stay "in the loop". However, many participants also stressed that in-house capacities to concretely assess the capabilities and potential risks of digital technologies, including data privacy and confidentiality concerns, are often difficult to assess. Therefore, successful digital approaches often require a network of actors with different capabilities that are closely integrated into local peacebuilding infrastructures. Much remains to be done to comprehensively evaluate the impact of such projects, and discussions were often lacking a concrete assessment of results.

Bottom-Up Approaches to Digital Peacebuilding. There was also a concern about how the use of digital technologies affects participatory approaches and the inclusivity of peacebuilding efforts. Machine-Learning, for instance, is increasingly used to analyse Big Data in efforts to support conflict analysis, and these activities can be carried out without the active involvement of conflict-affected populations. Some participants stressed that digital responses must also be tailored to the specific contexts in which they operate. Several initiatives discussed how such trends can be countered through participatory and inclusive approaches to Big Data. Yet, some participants stressed that the use of participatory data collection and analysis requires reducing the global digital divide and strengthening digital literacy among peacebuilding stakeholders. Participatory methods can also lead to new risks for vulnerable groups, including women, ethnic minorities or activists, as leaked data could be used for nefarious purposes. The feasibility of "bottom-up" approaches, given the considerable entry hurdles that come with the use of complex applications, merits further discussion.

Needs for strengthened collaboration and joint learning. The need for closer collaboration between 'traditional' peacebuilding actors, new digital peacebuilding initiatives, technology experts and the private sector was stressed in many of the sessions. As became clear, this not only requires building in-house capacity in peacebuilding organizations, but also increasing the awareness and knowledge of partners, regarding armed conflicts, peace processes and peacebuilding, to make sure that technologies are employed in a purposeful manner that is sensitive to the complexities of conflict and building peace. However, besides individual partnerships and initiatives focused on concrete projects, there exist relatively few concrete platforms that could facilitate forms of exchange that could enable such joint learning.