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Peacebuilding in a Digital Age – Which Role(s) for Civil Society?

20 May 2021

2.00-3.30 pm
CEST, online event

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KONFLIKT
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**in cooperation with the
German Platform for Peaceful
Conflict Management**

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

INEF

Imprint

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INEF Event Report

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Institut für Entwicklung und Frieden (INEF)

Peacebuilding in a Digital Age. What Role(s) for Civil Society?

Thursday, 20 May 2021, 2.00-3.00 pm (CEST)

Organised by the German Platform for Peaceful Conflict Management and the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) at the University of Duisburg-Essen, supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

Welcome

Ginger Schmitz

Managing Director, German Platform for Peaceful Conflict Management

Speaker

Julia-Silvana Hofstetter

Senior Advisor, ICT4Peace Foundation

Resource Persons

Adam Cooper

Senior Programme Manager, Cyber-Mediation, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

Angela Oduor Lungati

Executive Director, Ushahidi

Lisa Schirch

Senior Research Fellow, Toda Peace Institute

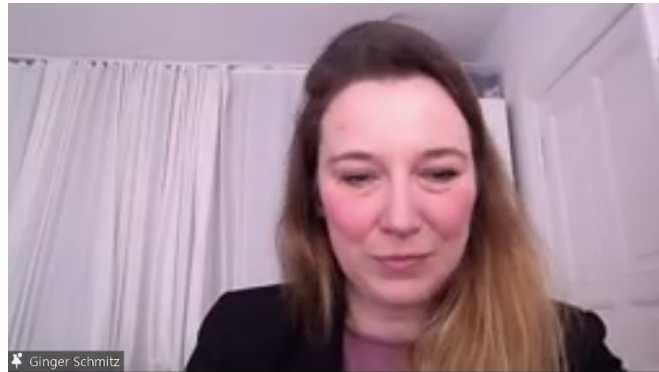Visiting Scholar in Peace Engineering, School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University

Moderator

Cornelia Ulbert

Executive Director, Institute for Development and Peace (INEF), University of Duisburg-Essen

The wide availability of digital technologies is increasingly impacting the work of peacebuilders, altering both peacebuilding practices and conflict dynamics. Among other things, digitalization has brought major innovations to the work of peacebuilders, establishing a new field of practice: "digital peacebuilding". Many of the innovative uses of peace technologies – for conflict prevention, transformation and reconciliation – have been driven by civil society organizations, who are also at the forefront of addressing the rising threat of digital conflict drivers. In the light of these trends, on 20 May 2021 the German Platform for Peaceful Conflict Management and the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF, University of Duisburg-Essen) jointly hosted the web event "Peacebuilding in a Digital Age Which Role(s) for Civil Society?".

In December 2020, the German Platform for Peaceful Conflict Management and INEF commissioned a study on digital technologies and peacebuilding with financial support of the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). In her welcome address to the online event, Ginger Schmitz, the Managing Director of the Platform, explained that the idea behind this initative was to provide a broad overview on how digital technologies are altering both peacebuilding practices and conflict dynamics. Since the Platform and INEF felt the need to get a grasp of the field, the two organizations asked Julia-Silvana Hofstetter, Senior Advisor at the ICT4Peace Foundation, to have a closer look at the kind of innovations digital tools might offer for peacebuilders. In particular, the author was invited to explore the role of civil society in developing and using digital tools and what kind of opportunities they might offer, but also the challenges they might hold in store for civil society actors.

The study, whose key findings have recently been published as INEF Report "Digital Technologies, Peacebuilding and Civil Society", provides a broad overview. Accordingly, there are many questions that need further exploration and discussion. The online event was thus meant to be the first in a series of possible further discussions. Consequently, the Platform and INEF invite suggestions from the audience for topics for prospective further events.

Digital Technologies Reshape the Parameters of Conflict

The event took as its point of departure a presentation of the major insights of Julia Hofstetter's study. In her opening statement to the event, the author first gave a brief overview of how digital technologies reshape the parameters of conflict and the different functional levels of peacebuilding. Digital technologies have paved the way for the emergence of new conflict drivers such as the weaponization of social media, digital authoritarianism, and cyberattacks.

Accordingly, digitalisation opens new spaces in which conflicts are fought:

- *The 'weaponization' of social media*: Social media intensify political polarization, accelerate the spread of disinformation, and lower the threshold for individuals to perpetrate or incite violence online.

- *Digital authoritarianism*: Conflict parties and repressive governments can deliberately use digital technologies as tools to mobilize support or to silence or spy on opponents and activists.

- *Offensive cyber capabilities:* The rising proliferation of offensive cyber capabilities among state and non-state actors, threatens to further escalate political tensions and spark new outbreaks of armed conflict.

Strategies to Address Emerging Threats

The question of how these altered conflict parameters might spoil peacebuilding efforts and how peacebuilders could incorporate these new threats into their work is still underexplored. However, civil society actors have already started to develop new strategies to address these new digital conflict drivers.

Regarding the weaponization of social media civil society peacebuilders can:

- Mediate online conflicts by seeking dialogue with online users or moderating online content;
- Support society's resilience against disinformation and hate speech through digital media literacy training and hate speech awareness campaigns;
- Reach out to conflict party leadership to negotiate acceptable online behavior in the context of armed conflict, possibly in the form of social media codes of conduct;
- Engage in global advocacy to improve the design and regulation of online platforms.

To address the rising threats of digital authoritarianism, civil society organizations can:

- Monitor and document the abuse of digital technologies by governments and hold governments but also technology companies accountable;
- Support local civil society actors by providing guidelines and training on how to fend off digital repression and by offering emergency support to organizations and activists that got hacked.

To address the impact of potential cyberattacks on conflict dynamics, civil society peacebuilders can reach out to conflict parties:

- To include defining unacceptable targets of cyber operations in a ceasefire agreement, for example, or establish structures to manage cyber incidents that arise during a peace process;
- To set up new mechanisms for dialogue to avert escalating cyber hostilities in situations where armed conflict has not yet occurred.

Digitalization has the Potential to Innovate the Work of Peacebuilders

Digital technologies have also enabled peacebuilders to innovate their work in terms of access to information, strategic communication and forms of engagement. As far as access to information is concerned, reaching out to affected populations through digital technologies improves peacebuilders' ability to gather relevant information, not only about the conflict but also about citizens' needs and interests. Moreover, digital tools also allow peacebuilders to share information with citizens directly, bypassing possibly blocked local government institutions, and thus rendering their communication more strategic. Finally, with respect to forms of engagement, digital technology enhances the ownership and agency of local organizations and citizens who can make their voices heard or mobilize through digital platforms.

As a result, strategic peacebuilding activities in the fields of early warning and conflict prevention, conflict transformation, and transitional justice and reconciliation have started to acquire a digital dimension based on the use of technologies such as artificial intelligence, geographic information systems, and information and communication technologies.

Digital Technologies Necessitate a Paradigm Shift in Peacebuilding

Building on this overview, Julia Hofstetter sketched three issues of particular relevance when it comes to ensuring meaningful digital peacebuilding by civil society practitioners. To begin with, she highlighted that while digital technologies carry the potential to empower local communities and citizens by giving them the opportunity to self-organize and develop alternative peacebuilding infrastructures, many digital peacebuilding projects are rather "extractive" as local populations are often treated as mere sources of data. Against this background, Julia Hofstetter advocated for a shift from "digital inclusion" of civil society to "digital agency", i.e. the systematic consideration of local voices and priorities in decision-making processes revolving around the development of peacetech and tech-enabled initiatives.

Secondly, she encouraged civil society peacebuilders to further explore how emerging conflict frontiers in cyberspace, such as rising political tensions due to cyberattacks or online polarization and the spread of disinformation, open new fields of action for them. For example, she stressed that peacebuilders could counteract political polarization, digital disinformation and dangerous speech on social media by initiating dialogue with online users or moderating online content. She also pointed to the potential incorporation of provisions on offensive cyber capabilities and acceptable online behaviour into conflict management mechanisms in the context of armed conflict.

Finally, Julia Hofstetter drew attention to the global nature of the threat digital technologies pose to peace and democracy. Given this reality, she strongly argued against viewing digital peacebuilding through the lens of the conventional Global South vs. Global North dichotomy. Instead, she championed a paradigm shift in peacebuilding geared towards the emergence of an integrated and diverse knowledge community.

Shifting from Digital Inclusion to Digital Agency

Julia Hofstetter's observations were subsequently discussed by three authoritative and renowned resource persons. To begin with, Angela Oduor Lungati, Executive Director of the Kenya-based peacetech online platform Ushahidi and co-founder of AkiraChix, a non-profit organisation that aims at bridging the gender gap in technology, stressed the importance of digital agency. Created in 2008 following the outbreak of large-scale post-electoral violence in Kenya, Ushahidi provides easy-to-use technology on a global scale to gather data from text messages, e-mails and social media in order to map violence hotspots, provide data visualization, and manage data. Originally founded for crisis response, election monitoring and human rights reporting, today, Ushahidi's platform is also used for environmental monitoring, citizen journalism, free and fair media, public service delivery, global health initiatives, and much more. Thus, Ushahidi moved from reaction to proactive engagement. It offers a replicable, scalable and sustainable software platform to empower people to raise their voices and help organizations listen and respond better. In this vein, Angela Lungati stressed that "access is ownership in action".

Regardless of physical location, the approach of Ushahidi consists in providing digital spaces to meet, thereby constantly innovating while engaging with different communities. However, Ushahidi does not only focus on finding a source of misinformation. The principal aim is to make

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data relevant by helping ordinary citizens to become data "literate". Thus, the emphasis is on educating and empowering people to be able, for instance, to distinguish "fake" news from "real" news.

As she offered valuable insights into her experience as a practitioner in the field of digital peacebuilding, Angela Lungati emphasized that in order to avoid the pitfalls of "extractivism", peacebuilders need to make data relevant and "digestible" for local marginalized communities. In this regard, she identified the need for peacebuilders to "close the feedback loop" by providing swift and helpful responses to data contributions made by citizens. In the end, she stressed, data collection is only a means to the end of behavioural change.

Adressing New Conflict Frontiers in Cyberspace

Following Angela Lungati, Adam Cooper, Senior Programme Manager for Cyber-Mediation, at the Swiss-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, highlighted the value of Julia Hofstetter's study, in which she "passed out the good from the bad" and paid attention to the digital conflict dynamics, simultaneously distinguishing between the harm that can be caused.

Against this background, he called for a joined-up approach for different parts of civil society and offered his view on how peacebuilders should address new conflict frontiers in cyberspace. In his assessment, online polarization on social media represents the major focus of existing digital peacebuilding efforts. He highlighted that existing projects in this realm take different approaches. For example, while initiatives such as the Commons program – set up in 2017 by the global NGO Build Up in partnership with MIT International Science and Technology – tackle polarization by encouraging social media users to critically reflect their online behaviour, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue is currently primarily concerned with reaching out to overarching conflict parties who ultimately drive both online and real-word hostilities. According to Adam Cooper, in the end, the prospects of all social media-focussed initiatives hinge on extensive preparatory research that allows for a sophisticated understanding of online narratives and their impact on the non-digital world.

Above (from left to right): Julia Hofstetter, Cornelia Ulbert, Lisa Schirch,
below (from left to right): Angela Lungati, Adam Cooper

Besides the need for thorough conflict analyses in the "online world", Adam Cooper also drew attention to the risks involved for civil society actors. The more data the peacebuilding community is collecting, the more it is opening itself up as targets for adverse reactions. Therefore, peacebuilding in cyberspace should be accompanied by an elaborated risk management framework. The human rights community has already developed a set of tools and strategies in this respect, which could also be used by peacebuilding actors. In practical terms, Adam Cooper also highlighted the technical challenges involved for civil society actors. In many, especially small organizations, the adequate in-house expertise is missing, not only in terms of technical

infrastructure but also in terms of human resources. Moreover, acting in cyberspace involves many political sensitivities touching not only upon questions of freedom of speech but also upon national security issues that make it difficult to work with governments.

Overcoming the North/South Divide in Digital Peacebuilding

Lastly, Lisa Schirch, Senior Research Fellow at the Toda Peace Institute commented on the North/South divide in (digital) peacebuilding and its underlying power dynamics. Lamenting the persistence of an "extractive mindset" in the US peacebuilding landscape, she contended that the field is in urgent need of being "decolonized". Achieving this, requires Western peacebuilders to listen to and learn from their counterparts in the Global South. For instance, according to Lisa Schirch, digital peacebuilding initiatives in settings such as Kenya, Afghanistan or Sri Lanka could potentially offer important insights for civil society actors working on the salient problem of right-wing extremism in Western democracies.

Irrespective of the technological innovations developed in the Global South, most of the social media platforms are based in the US. Since the US Congress has the power to regulate, tax and sanction these platforms it needs to consider the conflict sensitivity of social media and the associated responsibility of the global tech providers. In a similar vein, like the speakers before, Lisa Schirch stressed the need to focus on developing the digital agency of all actors involved in contrast to simply extracting data from local actors. As a consequence, she advocated for establishing ethical guidelines for digital peacebuilding.

Overall, the discussants agreed that the nascent field of digital peacebuilding bears an enormous innovating potential. Nevertheless, it also became clear that in the face of scarce human and financial resources it is crucial for digital peacebuilders not to overstate the capacity of their agenda and to avoid raising unrealistic expectations. Taken together, the inputs to the event presented a strong case for the intensification of dialogue, collaboration and resource-pooling both across divergent fields of expertise as well as across different geographical contexts.

The Institute for Development and Peace (INEF)

The Institute for Development and Peace (INEF), which was founded in 1990, is part of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Duisburg-Essen. We combine basic with applied research contributing to academic debates as much as to political discussions.

We work on issues at the interface of development and peace. Empirically, we focus on the situation of vulnerable groups in the Global South and structures of violence, poverty and lack of rights. From 2018 to 2021, our academic work focuses on »Ordering and Responsibility in the Shadow of Hierarchies«; with the following research areas: »Transnational Governance and the Responsibility of Private Actors«, »Development Partnerships in Times of SDGs« and »Resistance and Political Ordering«.

A diverse set of third-party funded research projects allow us to generate basic knowledge on politically relevant issues and to collect data as part of our field research. INEF is integrated in a strong and viable international research and collaboration network. We work particularly closely with the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:), Bonn, and the Centre for Global Cooperation Research (Käte Hamburger Kolleg, KHK) at the University of Duisburg-Essen.

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