

Peacebuilding and COVID-19

Wednesday, 16 June 2021

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EVENT DETAILS

On the 16th of June, DSAI's Humanitarian Action Study Group held an online roundtable on the impact of COVID-19 on peacebuilding. The discussion brought together actors across policy, research, and practice for a facilitated roundtable sharing recent evidence, insights and reflections on the impact of the global health crisis on peacebuilding.

Participants who kindly presented included:

- **Áine Hearn**s, Director, Conflict Resolution Unit, Dept of Foreign Affairs;
- **Dr Jamie Hagen**, Lecturer in International Relations, Queens University Belfast; Founding co-director for Centre for Gender in Politics
- **Dr Paul Quinn**, Head – From Violence to Peace, Christian Aid Ireland;
- **Claudio Alberti**, PhD candidate, Trinity College Dublin and Programme Officer (Analysis and Impact), Swisspeace; and
- **Megan Greeley**, PhD candidate, Trinity College Dublin.

Thanks also to all participants who took part in the discussion, and to Tiernan Brennan (Technical University Dublin) for participating on behalf of the DSAI Civil Society Study Group.

BACKGROUND

Recent years have seen an increasing concentration of humanitarian needs in protracted conflict-affected contexts. At the same time, there have been commitments by the international community for greater coherence between humanitarian, development and peace actors in key global frameworks, such as Agenda 2030, the Sustaining Peace Agenda and the Agenda for Humanity, among others. Moreover, peacebuilding activities not only represent a growing percentage of Irish ODA, but peacebuilding has also been identified as one of three key priorities of Ireland's tenure on the UN Security Council.

Progress on an ambitious agenda of achieving and sustaining lasting, equitable and inclusive peace however, has been further complicated by the global health crisis. COVID-19 and the global response presents a range of challenges (and opportunities) for peacebuilders, although research systematically mapping these impacts has been relatively limited to date.

The roundtable invited participants to share reflections on the following questions:

- What pre-existing challenges to peacebuilding have been exacerbated by the global health crisis?
- What new challenges to peacebuilding have been generated by the global health crisis?
- What positive opportunities for peacebuilding have been generated or reinforced by the current context?
- How do these impacts vary across different contexts, types of peacebuilding activity, and peacebuilding actors?
- What are the (preliminary) recommendations arising from these documented impacts for different stakeholders?
- What has been learned about peacebuilding pedagogy during the global health crisis that impacts policy, research, and practice?

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OVERVIEW OF KEY CHALLENGES

The discussion highlighted clear impacts of the global health crisis on peacebuilding activities. In research carried out by Claudio Alberti and Serena Clark of Trinity College Dublin, five discrete consequences were identified:

- First, the **restrictions on the mobility** of civilian personnel, including CSOs and NGO staff due to public health measures.
- Second, **limited rotation of peacekeeping troops**, blocked because of limitations on international travel, closures of borders and concerns about deployment of troops internationally.
- Third, some **peacebuilding projects were stopped altogether** as a result of the global health crisis.
- Fourth, **face-to-face activities involving dialogue and facilitation have been disrupted** with shifts to digital and other remote interfaces seen at times as less effective (a point reiterated by Megan Greeley in her presentation on peacebuilding and mentoring, where she highlighted how high-quality connections between people allowing peacebuilding to function).
- And fifth, **financial disruption due to shrinking funding in donor countries** alongside re-orientation of funding in some cases towards sectors considered more of a priority (such as WASH and health).

Alongside these broad categories, diverse groups and stakeholders within peacebuilding have faced specific challenges. Contributions by Áine Hearn highlighted how **women face particular challenges arising from the effect of the crisis itself, its economic consequences, and the disproportionate burden of informal care and health work which often falls to women**. These are especially serious for women and girls living in crisis and conflict, where women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding and protection has been affected.

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Challenges of humanitarian response and peacebuilding during COVID-19 are set against the backdrop of a wider trend of civil society space coming under attack globally, counter-terrorism legislation and hard security responses in crises.

During the discussion, participants highlighted the importance of not considering 'women' as a monolithic category, and rather, being attentive to the diversity within this very broad group. Similarly, Jamie Hagen highlighted how **gender and sexual minorities face particular challenges**. Dr Hagen highlighted pre-existing challenges for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) communities already marginalised prior to conflict, and already experiencing significant stigma and discrimination, with challenges to peacebuilding exacerbated by the global health crisis.

These challenges were set against the backdrop of a **wider trend of civil society space coming under attack globally**, including through counter-terrorism legislation and hard security responses in crisis, as highlighted by Paul Quinn. Heidi Reilly (UCD) emphasised the inter-linkages between new emergency powers during COVID and the risk that these are instrumentalised in the closing of civil society space. A further factor highlighted in discussion was how the pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in national cohesion, particularly in countries undergoing political transitions, where health services may be already weak or over-stretched, and political balancing has proven challenging.

While participants welcomed the call for a global ceasefire, Dr Quinn noted that this call has gone unanswered by many actors, meaning that **COVID-19 has inextricably escalated fragility in many contexts**. Together, these reinforce the need for more meaningful and wider engagement with marginalised groups to ensure peace is durable and sustainable. Research commissioned by the Dept of Foreign Affairs revealed, however, that women are not being deterred from efforts as a result of the pandemic; but emboldened to ensure any response is not a missed opportunity to build back better in a more gender-equal and gender-responsive manner (see UNWomen, GoI and GNWP, 2020, listed below).

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ADAPTATION IN CRISIS

One key theme of the discussion was flexibility in peacebuilding, funding and research during the crisis. Jamie Hagen, Áine Hearn and Paul Quinn all shared examples of research or programming that pre-dated the pandemic and was adapted to rapidly changing circumstances.

In the case of research projects, this **flexibility provided an opportunity to better understand the evolving realities** faced by peacebuilding stakeholders as the circumstances in which they were operating changed. As Ms Hearn noted, 'Not integrating the impact of the pandemic would have disconnected this from the reality faced by women peacebuilders.'

Similarly, Dr Hagen shared insights from research which continued during the pandemic among marginalised LGBTQ communities in Northern Ireland who lacked access to healthcare in many instances prior to COVID-19, further affecting their access to healthcare during the global crisis. **Many marginalised communities, including LGBTQ individuals and people of color, have high levels of mistrust and experience discrimination that further excludes them from access to essential services.** This continues to be a problem for transgender individuals living in Northern Ireland and across the UK who pre-pandemic already faced upwards of three years waiting for access to healthcare.

Dr Hagen and Megan Greeley sounded a note of caution, however, when undertaking **rapid consultations in the interests of rapid adaptation**, as there is a risk that these will exclude more marginalised groups, or risk reinforcing hierarchical and extractive practices in research and programming.

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From a peacebuilding practice perspective, Dr Quinn shared insights from Christian Aid's approach:

- First, **minimising actions implemented on the ground**, recognising social distancing undermines many peacebuilding efforts such as social gatherings and other traditional peacebuilding activities. Even where these were possible, organisations needed to coordinate with humanitarian colleagues to ensure hygiene packages and awareness materials were distributed and sanitation stations were set up to minimise negative impacts.
- Second, **mitigating by conducting rigorous conflict sensitivity analysis** to make sure activities were supporting the most vulnerable people, including women who were victims of violence where GBV was escalating in many contexts.
- Third, **adapting**: Christian Aid's Adaptive Approach works directly with local CSOs, who reflect on their own practices, test intervention strategies and adapt based on reflection to improve effectiveness. In the context of COVID, the organisation worked with local partners to do rigorous analysis to make sure adaptations worked for the context and reflected changes COVID-19 brought about.

For funding institutions, the global pandemic has spotlighted **the importance of flexible and responsive funding and strategic partnerships**. The discussion highlighted the many ways in which the global health crisis has disrupted civil society networks for organising, advocacy and peace activism: more sustainable funding and support for long-term relationship-building for CSOs can enable groups to more effectively and sustainably participate in peacebuilding processes and represent the diversity of experiences of the current crisis and conflict's impacts. Claudio Alberti shared results from ongoing research that shows that not all programmes, however, were able to adapt, in part because donor programming requirements sometimes limited changes, and not all donors adjusted to rapidly changing circumstances.

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Almost half of all organisations surveyed started to use digital solutions to continue activities during COVID-19, according to new research by Claudio Alberti and Serena Clark.

DIGITAL DIVIDES & DIVIDENDS

A second theme in the discussion was the leveraging of technology to overcome movement restrictions and social distancing barriers. Claudio Alberti shared research findings that **almost half of all organisations surveyed started to use digital solutions to continue activities during COVID-19**. Paul Quinn and Mr Alberti highlighted many of the advantages technology can afford, including increased engagement with a wider range of stakeholders, particularly young people through platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook. Similarly, Jamie Hagen highlighted how rural communities' participation in consultations could be enhanced by digital platforms that negated the need for lengthy travel.

Dr Quinn shared examples of **digital innovation** in Christian Aid's peacebuilding projects, including through initiatives to tackle misinformation and xenophobia that arose around displaced communities in Myanmar. Elsewhere, a project in Colombia utilised machine learning and natural language processing to more effectively tackle hate speech online and create a more amenable environment for reconciliation.

Nevertheless, participants also noted the **risks that digital divides might further exclude marginalised groups and hinder – rather than enhance – participation**. Áine Hearn's pointed out that the digital divide is deeply gendered, with women generally less likely than men to use mobile internet, and unable as a result to take advantage of many virtual modalities.

A previous Humanitarian Action Study Group roundtable explored how **digital communication can connect partners during periods of limited mobility, but noted it may not be sustainable in the long-run**, owing to the cost and inaccessibility of data and some platforms for some local organisations and researchers. Broader ethical, safety and human rights implications were also noted, with panelists in that earlier event drawing attention to risks associated with online communication when discussing sensitive issues such as human rights.

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LOCALISATION & CHANGE

The impact of the pandemic on localisation and institutional change was a third theme in discussion. Participants agreed that due to severely restricted travel, **INGOs and researchers have increasingly relied on local CSOs and NGOs with access to field locations**. Claudio Alberti characterised the global health crisis as 'one of the biggest pushes for the localisation agenda over past 20 years,' but questioned whether the changes we are currently seeing in implementation, funding and decision-making were being institutionalised and likely to be sustained post-crisis.

Mr Alberti reflected on the experience of local organisations in contexts including Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo, where organisations that were not necessarily linked to INGOs had responded very effectively, in part as a result of issues of mistrust between local organisations and external interveners and donor fatigue in those contexts. Similarly, in insights shared from ongoing research on peacebuilding pedagogy, Megan Greeley highlighted **the need to ensure collaborative working through the decolonisation of aid, citing the reluctance of many local organisations to return to a pre-COVID normal** in which decision-making power is concentrated among international actors.

The value of bottom-up peacebuilding approaches and reflective communal analysis was highlighted, particularly in relation to the role of local organisations in early warning systems and conflict prevention. Gene Carolan drew attention to the ways in which the global health crisis has, to some extent, re-centred the state in responses that may undermine meaningful civil society leadership in this field. On a similar note, discussion participants **explored the extent to which implementation and delivery, as opposed to more meaningful decision-making, financial and strategic power, had been localised** with these recent shifts, considering the extent to which the system might revert to the status quo in the absence of these more institutionalised changes.

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FURTHER READING

Booth, David et al. (2018). *Learning to Make a Difference: Christian Aid's Adaptive Programme Management in Governance, Gender, Peace Building and Human Rights*, [link](#).

Centre for Gender in Politics. (2021). *Feminist Activism and the Politics of Crisis in Northern Ireland: Why Gender Sensitive Analysis and Policymaking Must be a Priority*, [link](#).

CIVICUS Monitor. (2020). *People Power Under Attack 2020*, [link](#).

DSAI Humanitarian Action Study Group. (2020). *Humanitarian Research Learning Series - Equitable Research Partnerships*, [link](#).

Government of Ireland. (2021). *First Annual Report on Women Peace and Security: Ireland's Third National Action Plan*, [link](#).

Gray, Stephen. (2019). 'Calibrating Adaptive Programming across Multi-Country, Multi-Partner Organisations,' *ADAPT Peacebuilding Blog*, 8 July, [link](#).

UNWomen, Government of Ireland and Global Network of Women Peacebuilders. (2020). *Building Peace from the Grassroots: Learning from Women Peacebuilders to Advance the WPS Agenda*, [link](#).

Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. (2021). *The Impact of the Fall 2020 COVID-19 Surge on LGBT Adults in the US*, [link](#).

Women's Policy Group NI. (2020). *COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan*, [link](#).

GAPS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Ultimately, the discussion highlighted the many disruptions – and corresponding transformations – that the global health crisis has brought in the peacebuilding sector. Looking ahead, participants highlighted three key issues to consider in future work:

- **First, the need to learn from the global pandemic, and reflect deeply on how to integrate experimentation and adaptation in peacebuilding programming.** This includes developing adaptive models and more flexible frameworks, as well as adopting digital platforms and emerging technology (where appropriate, inclusive and safe to do so) to connect with more, and more diverse, stakeholders at different levels. The window for learning from the pandemic, however, is closing rapidly: there is an imminent risk of returning to the pre-COVID 'normal' and discussion participants agreed on the need to question this and recommit to building back better.
- **Second, the need to consolidate, institutionalise and build on progress made in localisation.** Set against the backdrop of wider changes in the humanitarian system, and increasing challenges to hierarchical and global North-centred systems, the global health crisis has accelerated local response and implementation, but more needs to be done to ensure a more inclusive and sustainable humanitarian and peacebuilding system post-crisis in which the centre of power and decision-making shifts more significantly to local partners.
- **Third, the need for projects on peace, security and COVID to be intentional about the diversity of peacebuilding stakeholders and conflict-affected communities, including but not limited to questions of gender and sexual minorities, as communities whose pre-pandemic marginalisation mean that they are likely to experience this crisis, and subsequent crises, differently.**