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Supporting Local Infrastructures for Peace Post COVID-19: The Role of an Integrated Peacebuilding-Development Approach in Asia and the Pacific

Expert-level Dialogue

28th January 2021

Summary Note[1]

This note presents the summary of the online dialogue among peacebuilding experts in Asia and the Pacific. The dialogue was focused on identifying policy gaps that need to be addressed to strengthen and build infrastructures for peace in the region. This note ends with a collation of actionable recommendations for more consolidated action to support infrastructures for peace at regional, national, and local levels in the region. The overall finding of this dialogue was that the development of peace infrastructures at all levels through deliberate and intentional partnerships has great potential to sustain peace in the long-term.

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1. Context

Throughout the Asia-Pacific region, violent conflict, extremism, securitisation of communities, lack of human security approach, shrinking civic space, and climate change are among the key challenges to sustainable development and peace. Many of these challenges are often the result of governance problems that create tensions between national governments and the people, especially minority groups. Governance problems include the distance between the government and its constituencies; limitations on local identity and culture; a lack of accounting for past abuses; and poor access to justice and security. The centralisation of the UN regional presence in South East Asia, whilst Asia and the Pacific represents a variety of contexts that cannot be supported through a regional presence, impacts the effectiveness of the UN ability to remedy some of the regional challenges.

The key to addressing the challenges is to address the above challenges by re-assessing the nature of governance, security, and justice in these regions, as well as building regional and national platforms for inclusive dialogue and action. Given the persistent divides in societies, potential polarisation among different segments of the population and political actors on needed reforms is an added challenge. The path to peace must therefore involve a shift toward moderate politics that will allow for key compromises and reforms to take place or pave the way for peace agreements and participatory and inclusive governance systems.

2. Infrastructures for Peace in Asia and the Pacific

The contextual nature of conflicts in the region has led to multifaceted definition of infrastructures for peace. While some of the global challenges to peace, such as inequality, militarisation and shrinking civic space, affect the context in Asia and the Pacific, experiences and

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[1] Recommendations from this dialogue will be incorporated into a final policy document on strengthening infrastructures for peace amid emerging crises such as COVID-19.

contexts of the societies across South Asia, Southeast Asia, North East Asia, and the Pacific are different and, as such, require regional response.

In Northeast Asia, where there is no regional mechanism to support conflict prevention, peacebuilding and development, civil society Track 3 dialogues are a crucial opportunity for experts to come together to coordinate, support and amplify each other's work. The Ulaanbaatar Process in North East Asia is a good practice example. It serves as an ongoing civil society-led open space for political dialogue and promoting effective work with governments and partners. Women's feminist mobilising is another regional platform that has been advanced by feminist groups at national levels to advance the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda and advocate for demilitarisation and transformation towards human security in the region.

In the Pacific, the impacts of climate change and, recently, of the COVID-19 pandemic, call for a conflict-sensitive action on the peace, security, development and humanitarian pillars. Between 2008-2011, collaboration between the United Nations and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) via a series of consultative processes with local peacebuilders resulted in the adoption of the regional Human Security Framework, Conflict Prevention Framework, Regional Framework for Security Sector Governance, and the Regional Action Plan (RAP) on Women, Peace and Security. These processes have informed the Boe Declaration on Regional Security adopted in 2018. The Declaration broadens the definition of security in the Pacific to include human security, humanitarian assistance, environmental security, and regional cooperation. Another example of sub-regional infrastructures is the partnership between the Shifting the Power Coalition and GPPAC Pacific that provides feminist financing support for local peacebuilders that is built on the idea of sharing resources to enhance national and local peacebuilding capacities.

In Southeast Asia, credible peace processes, advancing inclusion, and building capacities for community resilience remain to be critical priorities in the highly politically divided contexts. One example of peace infrastructure is the national peace process between the Government of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front in the Philippines. To support these processes, local peacebuilders develop regional training programs on peacebuilding and conflict transformation and work to coordinate informal dialogues, such as Lumad Husay Mindanaw (LHM) - an independent dialogue platform involved in the peace process and providing platforms for indigenous actors and other groups to engage in the peace process in the Philippines. Another good practice on the inclusivity of women is the ASEAN Women's Registry. It is a living registry that serves to identify women who could be supporting regional implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda.

In South Asia, the situation is characterised by the increase of securitisation of communities, especially in the context of COVID-19, and growing disconnect between the state and the people. In this context, local peacebuilders are seeking to advance peace education and the culture of peace to grow community resilience and capacities for peace at the local level.

Participants agreed that infrastructures for peace work best when they are locally rooted and when citizens, government and partners are working in concert. These infrastructures need to be comprehensive, coherent, and cross-sectional. Cross-sectionality, for instance, is crucial because there is a significant overlap between climate change, inequalities and poor governance, which have culminated into global crises that drive conflict in many contexts. Such policy coherence analysis is best learned from local peacebuilders who do not divide issues by policy agendas. The

efforts to promote more partnerships between governments, civil society and international agencies could also result in stronger impact on policy level.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on peacebuilding work

The impact of COVID 19 on the infrastructures for peace in the region were identified as follows:

Working across conflict lines
Participants identified coordination and collaboration to be two essential elements in addressing a pandemic; but these are especially hard to advance in conflict zones where responses need the support of all actors. Involving armed groups is critical if they hold territory or exert strong influence over local civilians. There are precedents for cross-conflict cooperation in Bangladesh, for example, where non-state armed groups have already assumed some responsibility for COVID-19 responses and international agencies have backed cooperation across conflict lines when organising mass vaccination campaigns. The response to COVID-19 provides an opportunity for foreign aid agencies, who are now obliged to work remotely, to support local capacities and enable them to drive local programmes that they have already pledged to take. In conflict-affected areas where people often mistrust or fear government representatives, including even health workers, local organisations can play a vital role by providing health services, gathering accurate information, and persuading local communities to change behaviour. Local peacebuilders can also use the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to spread positive messages online, consolidate resources on the culture of peace and community resilience and facilitate virtual trainings and workshops to make these resources available in communities.

Addressing misinformation
The victims of conflicts and ethnic minorities are especially vulnerable in the context of COVID-19. Families in refugee camps and temporary settlements endure poor sanitation, dense housing, and limited access to information. In Bangladesh, the government has restricted mobile internet access for almost 900,000 Rohingya confined to refugee camps around Cox's Bazar. The resulting information vacuum has allowed damaging rumours over COVID-19 to flourish. People suspected of carrying the virus, including refugees and migrant workers, are being stigmatised, leading to the underreporting of symptoms and unwillingness to seek treatment. Policymakers may have limited information on events in conflict-affected areas, from the spread of the virus through to the status of border closures and availability of basic goods. Measures to gather and report on data, qualitative or quantitative, can make a significant difference for areas that are off the radar and for marginalised groups who otherwise remain invisible.

Ensuring gender-sensitive response
Gender inequalities are known to be exacerbated by the combination of conflict and crisis. While statistically more men than women have serious symptoms and die from COVID-19, the indirect impact of the pandemic in conflict zones is likely to disproportionately affect women, aggravating gender-based violence. COVID-19 policy and legislative responses are being led predominantly by male decision-makers and political leaders. It shapes the impact of these policies on communities. The security-driven approaches that result largely fail to respond to the needs and experiences of diverse women, which is vitally important to social, political and economic recovery. Engaging local communities to address some of these challenges has been proven effective in the Pacific. As members of the Pacific Humanitarian Protection Cluster, GPPAC in the Pacific worked to ensure that response and recovery measures in the 6 member countries

use gender, age, disability and location (rural/urban) disaggregated data in order to reach the most marginalised and support the long- term solutions that sustain inclusive peace.

Looking at the unpredictable long haul
Even after the risks of outbreaks recede or a vaccine becomes available, the economic impacts of the virus will persist. Analyses of policy responses to major shocks indicate that the recovery may not necessarily "build back" the old normal. Once governments introduce new powers or impose new taxes, the temptation to retain them is strong. Where the COVID-19 pandemic accelerates changes that were already under way, it may trigger a tipping point into a new normal. For example, controversial forms of high-tech surveillance and monitoring of citizens may become acceptable. Moreover, the highly securitised responses in some countries of the region seem to have a positive impact on the spread and the number of COVID-19 infections; therefore, there is a risk of further securitisation of the entire region as governments adopt similar strategies. In some parts of the region, civil society members are already polarised on the effectiveness of securitisation. This is an opportunity for international peacebuilding experts to create a dialoguing space for such contending groups to reach a consensus and promote coordinated strategies for human security.

Facing virtual reality
Zoom or online communication are not an appropriate alternative for physical cooperation as well as political and technical dialogues, particularly because it bars indigenous people and those in the most remote areas from accessing the discussion. This is a big challenge that COVID 19 has instituted. There is a need to consider the potential of future pandemics and find means to continue promoting dialogue and cooperation virtually even in such circumstances has emerged. Thus, redefining approach to partnerships in the region should include considering how to ensure effective and inclusive dialogue beyond borders and how to build partnership modalities that can support all stakeholders when facing other crises.

Addressing securitisation
Impacts of COVID on securitisation of the region are very pronounced and highlight the need to advance human security rather than traditional responses. Civic space is constantly shrinking and requires that all actors using risk-informed engagement standards and principles. Civil society can play a significant role in encouraging peacebuilding actors to think beyond the current framework and build inclusive and impactful partnerships, if their opinions are considered.

Thinking about ongoing crisis
While peace processes and conflict dynamics have continued during COVID, peacebuilding approaches were not adequately adjusted to meet the challenges of increasing virtual engagement in the dialogue. At the same time, locally-led efforts to improve the prospects for peace by building platforms for dialogue in Nepal, Mindanao (Philippines), and Aceh (Indonesia) continue. There have also been efforts to reduce community-level conflicts through mediation and rapid response to impending crises. Local organisations also partner to help vulnerable groups redress their grievances and access the benefits, protections, and opportunities to which they are legally entitled.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic makes existing conflicts in Asia and the Pacific less predictable. Change often follows disruption. Accurate local information and high-quality analysis will be vital to make sense of the confusing new terrain.

4. Key priorities for action:

According to the participants, the following priorities need to be taken into consideration to build resilient societies within a context of sustainable peace in Asia and the Pacific:

- It is critical to strengthen deliberate and intentional multi-stakeholder partnerships across Asia and the Pacific, addressing securitisation and enhance the use of indigenous peacebuilding.

- The imperative of investing and supporting women organisations like the Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) and Korea Peace Now campaign cannot be overemphasised. This can facilitate the involvement of women in decision making and the transformation of the political system towards human security and justice for all.

- Building peace within the context of climate change, disasters as well humanitarian crises would require inclusive infrastructures for peace that enable the diversity of communities to be heard in the way that reflects people's understanding of what "human security" really is.

- COVID has provided more opportunities to improve peace outcomes by building capacities and skills for advancing community resilience. Virtual platforms can be leveraged to improve online communication with various groups. This communication could be systematised over time to ensure broader participation in the decision-making.

5. Next steps and recommendations:

Supporting Local Communities in their Peacebuilding Activities
Local peacebuilding efforts of local actors should be encouraged. For instance, the Ulaanbaatar Process is a civil society dialogue on peace and stability for the Korean Peninsula and broader Northeast Asian region. The dialogue has been held annually since its launch in 2015, with the goal of "making a habit of dialogue." The creation of similar processes, where they are missing, and the efforts to ensure that all dialogues are multi-stakeholder and build of comparative advantages of all parties should be the key priorities for donors, international experts, and national actors.

Establishing Sub-Regional Partnership Frameworks
Sub-regional partnership frameworks are vital in Asia and the Pacific. Together, national governments, the UN, civil society and other partners can bring their complementary advantages together to address specific challenges and navigate the political environment. The United Nations and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) lead a series of consultative processes that supported the adoption of the regional Human Security Framework, a Conflict Prevention Framework and Security Sector Governance Framework. Through such consultative processes, women local peacebuilders were able to actively lobby directly with government officials to transform the definition of regional security.

Promoting Inclusivity
As a matter of practice, affected populations need to be engaged in the decision-making on the decisions that affect them. This includes farmers and fisherfolk whose villages are neighbouring conflict zones, indigenous groups who receive least attention in conflict settings, migrant workers and refugees, among others. This also includes people living in contexts in the region that have

not been involved in policy debate, such as West Papua. GPPAC's interactions with fisher communities in Okinawa/Taiwan/mainland China should be leveraged, especially in the light of environmental and health drivers of emerging crises.

Women in Asia and the Pacific are strong actors for peace and preventers of conflict. In contexts including Nepal, South Korea, Timor-Leste and Bougainville, women's leadership has been proven time and again to support peacebuilding and reconciliation. These lessons should be replicated in the recovery from COVID-19. Women's full, equal and meaningful participation must be promoted in leadership and decision-making roles related to COVID-19 response and recovery, including in conflict-affected and fragile settings. Women peacebuilders must also be supported to monitor and document security-sector action, access to justice, and governance to promote transparency and accountability. Responses to COVID-19 must be proportionate, gender-sensitive and protect women's human rights.

Strengthening national and local mediation capacities.
International peacebuilding actors can facilitate and coordinate platforms for different actors to bring their capacities together (in light of their mandates) to drive efforts to sustain peace. Participants specifically recommended the creation of a conflict transformation hub that would bring relevant experts together to develop and implement new innovative ideas to address peace and security issues amid the pandemic and beyond. It would also provide an opportunity to imagine new ways of living together across political divides. Traditional leaders such as the religious clergies can be intermediaries who can help facilitate and convene dialogue where the two parties are not meeting. This would also mean building the capacity of the insider mediators in local contexts.

Promoting peace education
The current conflict studies curriculum in the region contains contents on conflict and security rather than peace and is available on demand. This can be addressed in such a way that peace education based on the concept of positive peace can be incorporated not only in the university level specialised courses but in curriculum at the elementary education level.