Supporting Local Infrastructures for Peace Post COVID-19:
The Role of an Integrated Peacebuilding-Development Approach
in Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia[1]

Expert-level Dialogue

16th February 2021

Summary Note

This note presents a brief summary of the online dialogue among peacebuilding experts in Europe and Central Asia, with a view to identifying the peacebuilding policy gaps that need to be addressed in the region. Addressing these gaps will ensure that the infrastructures for peace (I4Ps) in the region can deliver timely peacebuilding responses in order to support development gains. Additionally, the note features a collation of actionable recommendations for more consolidated action to support local infrastructures for peace at regional, national, and local levels in the region.

Participants included peacebuilding experts from Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Recommendations from this dialogue will be incorporated into a final policy document on strengthening infrastructures for peace post-COVID-19. The overall finding of this dialogue was that effective peacebuilding in the region requires the strengthening capacities and opportunities for partnerships between local peacebuilders, national governments, and intergovernmental organizations. Where these partnerships are active at the national and sub-regional levels, they have the capacity to prevent and de-escalate conflict, build a culture of peace, and improve community resilience.

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1. Context

In Europe and Central Asia, some examples of activities that local peacebuilders are engaged in include advancing peace education; strengthening mediation capacities and building platforms for dialogue; preventing violent extremism and radicalization and building social cohesion; advancing inclusive and representative participation of women and youth across all peace efforts, among other efforts that are shaped by sub-regional unique contexts, opportunities, and dynamics.

With the spread of COVID-19, locally informed and locally-led action has become even more important. In the context of fragile political climates; pervasive corruption; weak economies; high levels of youth unemployment; and a lack of information sharing between governments and people, local peacebuilders work to advocate for the adjustment of the response to the pandemic. This goes beyond traditional peacebuilding approaches by promoting peace education, organizing information channels to tackle the spread of misinformation, and supporting community efforts to raise awareness and tackle violence in communities and homes.

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[1] This consultation was held in partnership with UNDP as part of the UNDP-GPPAC partnership on analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on local infrastructures for peace across the globe.

COVID-19 challenges the conventional concept of peace, highlighting the importance of understanding peace from the perspective of the people, particularly of local communities. Through an inclusive and integrated peacebuilding-development approach, multi-stakeholder partnerships could be built to attune to the varied needs of local communities and, as such, sustain peace within them.

2. Local priorities for action: Selected Good Practices

Participants identified the following key priorities for peacebuilding in the region:

- *Peace Education:*
  - Peace education is fundamental in divided societies. As history has shown, tensions between ethnic groups can lead to violence; as such, education forms a key part of preventative action. In fragile political contexts such as the Western Balkans, education for peace can help bridge conflict divides. In certain parts of the region, educational systems are still divided along ethnic lines. Education for Peace is key to preventing segregation and increasing social cohesion amongst all schoolchildren. The Nansen Model of Integrated Education utilized in the Western Balkans[2] is one of the models of peace education utilized by GPPAC members. Building on this model, the Hansen Dialogue Center has developed the *School Education in Multiethnic Communities* training programme for teachers and proposed a model for school mediation clubs that has proven to be an effective mechanism for the prevention of inter-communal conflicts.

- *Peace journalism and strategic outreach programmes:*
  - Peace journalism[3] in the South Caucasus and interactive applications promoting ideas of peace in Central Asia are critical initiatives that contribute to confidence building between people living across conflict divides. These efforts enable the production and dissemination of a number of free and accessible materials about peace and conflict prevention. Such an outreach inspires alternative understandings of issues, counters hate speech and false information, and helps to overcome hostility and distrust between various actors and builds an environment of mutual support and trust. It could also bring people together, including through creating a platform for dialogue. The Dialogue Platform in Ukraine is one such initiative that brings together people in Luhansk and Donetsk, among other nearby territories.

- *Support for local peacebuilding:*
  - The visibility of local peacebuilders in the region needs to be enhanced while also maintaining a do-no-harm approach. This entails the need to consult with an inclusive and representative group of local peacebuilders and engage with them in the development of peacebuilding programming. In the South Caucasus[4], particularly, after the 2020 escalation of conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, the lack of engagement of local peacebuilders became very visible. The divide between communities continues to grow, and the internal needs of communities remain unaddressed. Similarly, all

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[2] GPPAC, 2020. Education for Peace: Bridging the Divide in the Western Balkans:
https://www.gppac.net/education-peace-bridging-divide-western-balkans
[3] GPPAC, ICCN, 2020. In Search of Sustaining Peace: A Case-Study of Peacebuilding in South Caucasus:
https://www.gppac.net/resources/search-sustaining-peace-case-study-peacebuilding-south-caucasus
[4] Ibid.

actors working on Track 2 of Confidence Building Measures (CBM) in the South Caucasus have remained invisible and with limited influence for the past 30 years, often finding themselves in the parallel dialogue not connected to the main peace negotiations.

- *Innovative use of technologies:*
    - The participatory video (PV) methodology project, carried out with support of the Peacebuilding Fund in Kyrgyzstan,[5] has worked to address some of the most challenging questions in peacebuilding. This methodology is particularly powerful in polarized conflict settings and among marginalized groups. As an innovative and engaging tool, PV leverages modern technology to enable boys and girls to share their experiences of engaging with their peers, and inform decision-makers of some critical social issues and propose the ways to address these issues. This initiative unmasks barriers to social cohesion, and empowers youth to develop their own solutions.

- *Engaging of women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding:*
    - Development and implementation of programs focused on Women, Peace and Security remain ad-hoc across the region and continue to focus on the traditional notion of security. There is a reluctance to engage in systematic efforts to integrate human security analysis that builds upon the experiences and perspectives of diverse groups of people. With the limited participation of women in decision-making, such efforts risk creating an image of women as victims of conflict in peacebuilding efforts. Doing so would further exacerbate difficulties faced by women's networks, such as the Network of Women Mediators of South Caucasus, while engaging in peace processes[6].

3. Local Infrastructures for Peace During COVID-19

COVID-19 has amplified political and socio-economic rights-based shortcomings and exacerbated the crisis of multilateralism in some parts of Europe and Central Asia. Meeting peacebuilding challenges requires partnership with local communities who are the first responders and face the greatest impact. Peacebuilders, however, lack visibility, lack recognition and lack legitimacy by national actors.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, all peacebuilding efforts are now conducted online. Social distancing, shrinking civic space and the lack of flexible funding undermined many peacebuilding projects, as the need to adapt to online dialogue and lack of access to the internet continue to challenge opportunities.

4. Next Steps and Recommendations

The following recommendations have been devised during the discussion to ensure that infrastructures for peace at all levels are capable of better respond to peacebuilders' priorities and, as such, maintain peace in communities. The critical opportunities for joint action between local peacebuilder and multilateral partners include:

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[5] GPPAC. 2019. Webinar: Participatory Video in Peacebuilding: Lessons Learnt from Occupied Palestinian Territories and Kyrgyzstan: https://www.gppac.net/news/webinar-participatory-video-peacebuilding-lessons-learnt-occupied-palestinian-territories-and

[6] GPPAC, ICCN, 2020. In Search of Sustaining Peace: A Case-Study of Peacebuilding in South Caucasus: https://www.gppac.net/resources/search-sustaining-peace-case-study-peacebuilding-south-caucasus

Taking effort to build long-term intentional partnerships among peacebuilding actors
- Peacebuilding spaces are becoming increasingly broad in scope through engaging with a greater number of partners. These partners are bringing their own discourse, approaches, strategies and programming into conversations. Local peacebuilders are different from policy-focused stakeholders as their experiences are often rooted in practical experiences. As such, their work is often misunderstood by the policy-driven peacebuilding sector. As outlined in the UN System-Wide Community Engagement Guidelines[7], sufficient time and resources need to be allocated to engage and build intentional partnerships among national actors, local peacebuilders and multilateral partners. Partnerships should not be rushed; instead, all parties involved should take their time to understand one another and build relationships based on mutual trust and understanding. Intentional engagement requires capacity on all sides to become open-minded (both towards policy and experience-based approaches) and committed to long-term partnerships. The Do No Harm approach should also underpin the engagement.
- Regardless, capacity building for local peacebuilders remains a critical gap in partnerships-building. The *Strategic Framework for the Development of Civil Peacebuilding activities in Ukraine* could be utilized as a resource for the development of local peacebuilding capacities on policy, communication and consensus building. Funding support should also be directly available for capacity building (rooted in practical training) in a way that allows local peacebuilders to engage in intergovernmental peacebuilding efforts across the programmatic cycle.

Strengthening mapping to meaningfully and comprehensively inform decision-making
- In order to appropriately determine peacebuilding priorities, an effort to map peacebuilding actors at both the national and regional levels need to be undertaken. Women, young people, people in remote areas cannot be ignored. Working with locally-led networks like GPPAC could offer opportunities to reach beyond the "usual suspects", and engage with experts who have not yet been part of the discussion but could offer valuable perspectives to priority setting.

Supporting inclusive national dialogue and partnership
- There should be more investment in national dialogues between government and non-government actors (such as local peacebuilders). One opportunity for this dialogue could be national governments' engagement in global policy dialogues, such as Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs) and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) presented during the annual High-Level Political Forum. At the national level, governments could host consultations with peacebuilding experts to inform their engagement at the global level.
- Platforms should be created that will allow civil society representatives to directly engage with relevant national authorities on conflict-related issues, including the new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (such as practical challenges of crossing borders and obtaining necessary documentation, experiences of living in non-government controlled areas, etc.).

Supporting cross-border horizontal and vertical dialogue
- Efforts to "re-humanize" people living across conflict divides with diverging values, attitudes and ideological orientation must be undertaken. Where relevant, joint projects

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[7] United Nations. 2020. The UN System-Wide Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace: https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/content/un-community-engagement-guidelines-peacebuilding-and-sustaining-peace-0

– rather than designing separate projects for each country – should be supported. This could include programs for exchange of conflicting interpretations of historical events and figures (such as demonstrating the "human dimension" of past developments; promoting inclusive dialogues about various symbols and memorials and contested historical narratives, etc.).

Advancing locally-led regional and sub-regional mediators networks
● Locally-led mediators' networks serve to support the dialogue between people across conflict divides, as well as to build local capacities for peace through providing ownership and providing an opportunity to exchange. However, locally-led mediators' networks, where exist, often do not enjoy the same amount of political attention, often functioning on a voluntary basis. It is critical therefore to support these networks by offering capacity building opportunities, sharing knowledge and tools on mediation, and providing adequate financial support.

Focusing on national post-traumatic healing
● There is a great need for trauma healing. Strong tensions and cleavages divide rival ethnic and political groups, and the repatriation displaced peoples often results in political instability, stigmatization, intolerance, polarization, and the continuation of fighting. Peace, where it exists, is extremely fragile in the region, and people suffer from great psychological pain. This makes it hard to discuss the hard truths among the parties to the conflict. Mental health and psychological support should be provided for persons who have been directly (or indirectly) impacted by conflicts, especially refugees and displaced persons.

Promoting the principles of human security
● Governments in the region should begin to focus more on human security rather than military security. This can be initiated by actively engaging in security planning local activists and grassroots initiatives from areas directly affected by the conflict. The intergovernmental partners can also support the capacities of national governments to engage in confidence building.

Providing safe online spaces for peacebuilding networks
● In the context of COVID-19, it is critical to ensure safe online spaces for people to get in touch with one another, whilst avoiding misinformation, hate speech and radicalization. Social media outreach should be explicitly designed to contribute to mutual understanding and reconciliation. Peacebuilding experts and conflict resolution scholars, professional journalists and young bloggers could all come together to form national and cross-border advisory councils. These organizations could support the formulation of online outreach strategies with a goal to reconcile people separated by the conflict who either have very little knowledge of one another, or have mostly negative perceptions. A good example of such a network which could potentially be upscaled be upscaled is the dialog.org.ua in Eastern Europe between people in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts of Ukraine.
● Digital technologies play a big role in shaping how conflicts are created and addressed today. The field of conflict resolution is being digitized, partially as a result of COVID-19. Conflict parties and stakeholders use digital technologies (i.e. social media) as tools for advancing their agendas and interests; approaches to peacebuilding need to "catch up" and respond to this growing trend. Peacebuilding practitioners can work on adopting and

finetuning common conceptual framework for digital inclusion which creates awareness on the diversity of contexts, associated risks and unintended consequences.

Investing in peace education
- Across the region, various models of peace education are taking shape. It is critical to support a systematic review and critical comparative analysis of all existing pilots, programs and experiments incorporating peace education elements into school curricula. The evaluation, development and integration of peace education programs and modules in the educational system could be conducted based on existing tools established in this field, such as the Nansen Model of Integrated Education utilized in the Western Balkans. This model emphasizes joint multi-ethnic education, the importance of investing in teacher capacity and networking with key stakeholders in education.

Integrating gender analysis in peacebuilding action
- Due to the lack of reliable and inclusive gender and sex-disaggregated data, the experiences of women and the gendered impact of immediate and protracted conflicts in Europe and Central Asia, is often misunderstood. Support is needed for women's networks to maximize their capacity to collect relevant information and address the gendered impacts of conflict in partnership with relevant stakeholders. This will reduce violence and intolerance based on stereotypes and prejudices against other identities, and increase social cohesion within society.

Supporting restorative and transformative justice
- Peacebuilding work should support the goals of transitional justice, including equal access to judicial mechanisms and the protection of people from non-government-controlled territories. Justice should equally apply to all parties to the conflict, and victims need to participate in the justice process.