

Online Peace-building Dialogue: Opportunities & Challenges Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Emergence

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Abstract: While peacebuilding dialogue would normally take place face to face, restrictions in ensuring a safe space and travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the geographical dispersion of participants necessitated the move towards an online platform to avoid its collapse. The shift towards online platforms has presented new opportunities and challenges to peacebuilding – both official and unofficial. Online peacebuilding dialogue is cheaper, quicker and easier to organise than face-to-face meetings. These advantages have allowed for the inclusion of wider and typically marginalised groups. Online tools have also made it simpler and indeed possible for those groups to join peace talks from their homes allowing a wide geographical coverage of participants. Despite these advantages, there are challenges to whether Online Peacebuilding Dialogue can replace in-person dialogue. Furthermore, the shift has presented facilitation challenges to peacebuilders due to the increased number of participants and the nature of online dialogue. Moreover, online tools can amplify existing marginalisation leading to dialogue domination by certain classes. This paper aims to understand the challenges and opportunities arising from this shift to conducting dialogue and peace talks – both formal and informal – to online platforms due to the spread of COVID-19. The paper concludes by proposing a set of facilitation recommendations to those organising and facilitating peacebuilding dialogue to ensure the successful creation of a safe online communicative space suited to conducive peacebuilding dialogue.

Keywords: Peace Talks, Peace and conflict, Dialogue, Participatory dialogue, COVID-19, Peacebuilding dialogue

Introduction

This research explores the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on dialogue for peacebuilding. It adopts a participatory research methodology, allowing the researcher to work closely with those facilitating formal and informal peace talks in Syria, Yemen,

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and the South Caucasus. The pandemic, which has forced peacebuilding work to move into virtual spaces to avoid the suspension of talks, has presented new challenges and opportunities within the peacebuilding sector. While COVID-19 can be seen to have offered exhausted conflict parties a 'way out', especially when obtaining victory is costly, arguably this has, at least temporarily, resulted in reduced conflict indicators, and in some cases, ceasefires like those in Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Cameroon. This has paved the way for genuine peacebuilding on a local and grassroots level.

While the theory and practice for dialogue in its in-person setting are developed, the understanding of the impact and performance of dialogue in online settings, especially for peacebuilding, is still pre-mature. Furthermore, most research on peacebuilding focuses on formal peace talks, while limited attention is given to peacebuilding on local levels. As such, this article aims to expand the conceptualisation of online and virtual peacebuilding dialogue by summarising the new challenges and opportunities from an empirical perspective. The article will conclude with a set of recommendations for peacebuilders to ensure their Online Peacebuilding Dialogue (OPD) is effective, inclusive, and can have real, tangible results.

This article is divided into three sections: the first aims to present definitions of peacebuilding, dialogue for peacebuilding, peacotech, and online dialogue. This will allow us to define a newer concept, OPD, as the participatory dialogic process between conflicting parties with different and opposing perspectives to build genuine and sustainable peace in an online virtual safe space. This article aims to address the knowledge gap of this new OPD concept, as it will form the heart of this study.

The second section will present the opportunities and challenges arising from the shift from in-person to online peacebuilding. It will focus on three case studies: Syria, Yemen and the South Caucasus, each preceded by a brief contextual background to each conflict. The article will then explore the opportunities and challenges in each context to produce a summary.

The third section outlines a series of recommendations for OPD facilitators to ensure conducive and effective peacebuilding in the virtual world. The aim is to contribute to the wider peacebuilding community as part of its actions on how to effectively run OPD and improve its quality. It will be concluded that adopting a participatory approach, ensuring a safe virtual space for discussion, and involving hard-to-reach groups by adding an offline component in such processes would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of online peacebuilding. Further, online tools can provide anonymity to participants in divided communities. Anonymity can simplify the adoption of intergroup dialogue and promote dialogue instead of debate to improve social cohesion and lasting reconciliation.

While the implications of COVID-19 on peacebuilding continue to develop, this study's true power is in its complementarity of theory and practice to provide an accurate and up-to-date summary. It provides an entry point for further research on scaling up local-level OPD and improving its links to official peace talks.

Methodology

Participatory Action Research

Given the geographical scope, the impossibility of having face-to-face dialogue due to COVID-19, and the scant literature on the subject, this research adopts a participatory action research (PAR) methodology to expand and improve the current knowledge and understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by the shift to online peacebuilding.

PAR is succinctly defined as a process for action-oriented research that involves researchers and participants collaborating and co-producing instrumental and practical knowledge around a problem, and potentially an action for a better outcome (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005; McKay 2011; Beaton et al. 2017). Participatory research entails the participation of those affected by the research (those involved in organising peacebuilding dialogue, referred to henceforth as co-researchers) in the entire research process as opposed to purely interviewees. Alongside the author of this article, co-researchers were also involved in identifying the research problem and engaged effectively in the formulation of recommendations (Guzman et al. 2016; Kemmis & McTaggart 2005; McKay 2011; Beaton et al. 2017; Marzi 2020; Kindon et al. 2007). The selection of PAR as the primary research methodology can also serve to encourage those involved in peacebuilding dialogues to adopt PAR as a method to increase the quality of participation and inclusion in their work.

This co-production research aims to add validity and accuracy, while also giving ownership of the research to the co-researchers. This stands in contrast to traditional research methodologies as such methods often force those most affected by the research to relinquish control of it (Guzman et al. 2016; Cornwall & Jewkes 1995). Furthermore, this process of co-production ensures the timeliness of collected data and increases its relevancy by capturing an empirical perspective from those directly involved in peacebuilding dialogue throughout the research cycle. Such advantages are not typically available in other more conventional research methodologies (Beaton et al. 2017). This is especially imperative given the limited understanding of the ramifications of COVID-19 on peace talks.

Data Collection

To ensure timeliness and relevance to our current context, interviews were conducted

between April and August 2020, and, where possible, have been compared to the available literature. The researcher conducted interviews with three interviewees on Syria, three interviewees on Yemen and one interviewee on the South Caucasus. The strength of this research stems from its involvement of interviewees who are former human rights ministers, members of gender-based working groups, university lecturers, members of UN constitution-drafting committees, and INGO professionals. This has added relevancy to the research and improved its empirical accuracy. For security reasons, all names of persons and organisations have been anonymised.

Interviewee	Context	Profession	Method
Anonymous	Yemen	Former human rights minister	Interview, Whatsapp messages and Voice Notes + Follow up Interview
Anonymous	Yemen	Member of Gender-based working group	WhatsApp messages + Questionnaire + Follow up Interview
Anonymous	Yemen	University Lecturer	WhatsApp messages + Questionnaire
Anonymous	Syria	Project officer – Syrian Constitution	Interview + Follow up Interview
Kholoud Helmi	Syria	Member of Gender-based working group	Interview
Bassam Al-kuwatli	Syria	Member of a political party	WhatsApp Interview
Anonymous	South Caucasus	NGO Project Manager	Interview

One of this research's strengths is its participatory problematisation of the research questions, especially as interviewees are directly involved in peacebuilding. The interviews relied on the guiding questions below:

1. How did the formal and informal peace talks and dialogue change after being moved online due to COVID-19? Is it more/less effective? Promising? Or is it creating more challenges to peace?
2. Would you say the reduced costs of hosting such dialogues can include more people who were not typically sitting on the table, especially as some of them were not able to travel and participate?
3. For women's participation, would you say that their participation is tokenistic, or was the dialogue actually effective, and were their views and opinions captured?
4. Do you think online peace talks created a safe space for anonymity, where

people can discuss sensitive issues freely as opposed to in-person talks?

5. Did online dialogue improve intergroup dialogue, especially in terms of identity dialogue?

The data was also analysed in a participatory way, where arguments and findings from one interview are shared in another interview to check their relevance across contexts.

Online Tools

This research was facilitated remotely to overcome issues of social distancing in the context of COVID-19. Online tools, similar to those used for online peace talks, were used to conduct Key Informant Interviews and provide high levels of anonymity and privacy compared to physical meetings. Consequently, complementing PAR with the use of online tools allowed the researcher to open a virtual communicative space through an emancipatory process, reducing potential biases and empowering marginalised groups by balancing power relations.

Research Limitations

As with all research, this study has its limitations given both the complexity and novelty of the topic. Conducting PAR and collecting data online poses significant time challenges since building relationships and creating the safe communicative space necessary for genuine dialogue is tedious and time-consuming (Pearson et al. 2016; Beaton et al. 2017). These conditions are further accentuated by the non-tangible characteristics of this safe space due to the pandemic. This lack of physical presence may result in reduced understanding of participants' intentions, level of honesty and ambiguity, especially because direct interaction between participants is lacking (ibid.)¹.

This has been the case in this research, where the time constraint is the biggest challenge. Although this research relied heavily on seven interviewees who are directly engaged in peace talks and peacebuilding, it could have benefited from a wider perspective if sufficient time was available.

Additionally, given the novelty of the topic, there is limited literature available to refer to. As the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic and political ramifications continue to develop and mutate, this poses additional challenges to researchers attempting to assess its effect on peacebuilding and conflict more broadly. Furthermore, access to literature in libraries was considerably limited by pandemic restrictions, meaning that, largely, only online sources could be consulted. Despite these obvious limitations, by relying on broad empirical perspectives and experiences

1 By using audio and/or video solutions, extra-linguistic limitations are effectively minimised.

the researcher hopes to provoke a fresh dialogue on this issue between practitioners, academics, and conflict parties.

Online Peacebuilding Dialogue: Towards A Definition

The literature on peacebuilding and dialogue in online settings is scant. However, literature that discusses issues and topics of close relation to the theory that forms the core of this study is available. As such, this section will endeavour to summarise literature regarding dialogue within peacebuilding, the importance of dialogue within peacebuilding processes, peacetech, and theories and assessments of online dialogue. This will allow the presentation of a broad definition of OPD which will form the basis of the following sections.

Dialogue

This article conceptualises and defines dialogue as a process of interaction, collective learning and trust-building between different parties that encourages and facilitates deeper levels of understanding of the underlying sources of conflict to resolve it (Ballantyne 2004; Saunders 1999).

This definition presents a more developed vision of dialogue building on Bohm's (1996) interpretation of dialogue as the process of creating shared understanding and meanings. While Bohm sets a solid theoretical foundation on what dialogue means in a broad sense, Ballantyne and Saunderson's definition allows us to focus more specifically on effective peacebuilding dialogue and the *co-creation*, rather than just the sharing and exchanging, common understandings of and solutions to violent conflict.

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding as a process was first unveiled by UN-secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and is defined as the process of understanding the root causes of armed conflict and its recurrence, and contributing to the activities that contribute to long-lasting peace (United Nations 1992). Dialogue is imperative to and embedded within any peacebuilding process since effective peacebuilding requires inclusive dialogue on conflict, which presents opportunities for learning and engagement with conflicting perspectives (Bickmore 2014). Dialogue as a key and fundamental peacebuilding action can promote inclusivity of marginalised groups and ensure their voices are amplified and captured (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2019). Further, it is argued that dialogue improves the understanding of the challenges caused by conflicts, especially in fragile contexts (Marah 2015).

While most literature on peacebuilding and conflict resolution focuses on formal negotiations, little attention is paid to micro-level dialogue and how it can lead to

long-lasting reconciliation (Saunders1999). This is translated empirically as the disconnection between macro and micro levels of peacebuilding (ibid.). Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are thought to play the role of bridging various levels of peacebuilding, as they are both active on the ground and involved in Track One peace negotiations (Paffenholz 2006).

Consequently, this article will adopt a micro-level approach to peacebuilding, allowing the identification of knowledge gaps. This is especially relevant as Leonardsson & Rudd (2015) highlight the importance of the inclusion of domestic actors at various societal levels for developing a holistic and effective approach to peacebuilding.

Online Dialogue

Online dialogue is widely utilised in peace education to bring students from across conflict divides to collaborate towards peace. While there are limited studies on online peacebuilding, introducing technology to facilitate intergroup dialogue has long been accepted as an effective method.

Research shows that online facilitation can ensure 24-hour accessibility and can reduce impacts of visual and superficial differences (Basharina 2009; Fournier-Sylvester 2016). Furthermore, online platforms promise a larger, richer, and more diverse group of participants to engage in a deeper and safer dialogue as opposed to face-to-face platforms (ibid.). Moreover, virtual spaces allow participants who are usually unable to attend physical meetings due to travel, conflict, personal engagements, and now, pandemics (Beierle et al. 2016). Lastly, online dialogue can also create a space to free emotional constraints of the past and work towards peace and reconciliation by releasing anger through dialogue (Quintiliani et al. 2011).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, online teleconferencing was utilised for peace dialogue (Mashour 2020). In Afghanistan, a Skype meeting was organised between the Afghan government and Taliban to discuss a potential prisoner exchange – an important aspect of the peace process (Ullah et al. 2020). This prisoner-exchange process was agreed later on, which suggests that online platforms can substitute face-to-face meetings (NPR 2020). In 2010, a dialogue between Cambodian American survivors and Khmer Rouge perpetrators was facilitated through videoconferencing (Quintiliani et al. 2011).

Peacetech

The term *peacetech* was coined in 2015 to refer to the strategic use of emerging technologies that contribute to better peacebuilding by affording greater participation and initiating new forms of engagement (Gaskell 2019; The British Council 2016). In a study in Syria by the British Council and Build up, the research discussed the

broader strategic opportunities and how the concept can be deployed. However, the research highlights questions about the use of peacetech and its impact on conflict discourse (The British Council 2016). Further, little is understood as to how these issues impact conducting peacebuilding dialogue in a broad empirical sense, especially when physical spaces are not available due to pandemics. This study will build on and attempt to address these knowledge gaps.

Online Peacebuilding Dialogue

To do this, this article will utilise the emerging concept of OPD that combines peacebuilding with direct dialogues between conflict parties in formal and informal settings. OPD can be seen as the intersection and overlapping of dialogue, peacebuilding, online dialogue and peacetech.

Accordingly, OPD can be defined as a participatory dialogic process between conflicting parties with different and opposing perspectives that allows the development of genuine and sustainable peace through an online virtual safe space. This differs subtly from peacetech, as while peacetech utilises broader social media campaigns and technological support for activists, OPD conceptualises the utilisation of new online communication tools to facilitate dialogue between conflict parties.

Given the paucity of literature on OPD and the probable and continued reliance on online communication tools to conduct peacebuilding work after COVID-19, the following section will explore and assess empirical experiences of online peacebuilding to contribute to and expand the knowledge of this emerging issue. If practitioners are to fully utilise and adapt to this new paradigm, it is vital that academics, practitioners, and conflict parties themselves can fully harness its impact and address its challenges.

Syria

Since 2011, Syria has been embroiled in a civil war that has cost upwards of half a million lives and displaced over two-thirds of the country's population (Home Office 2020). With its beginning in protests that demanded social and democratic political reforms to address state repression, elite corruption, poverty, and inequality (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami 2016), the situation deteriorated and protesters were confronted with extreme violence. As a result, civilians and defected soldiers took up arms against government forces, transforming the protests into a vicious, geopolitical civil war (Abu-Ismaïl et al. 2016).

Today, the Syrian regime has been able to regain the vast majority of territories lost to armed opposition groups. This has rendered the peace process impotent as the regime focuses on military gains, recognising that military advances gain far more than peace talks in Geneva and Astana (Seligman & Lynch 2019). Further, peace talks in Syria

still fail to address the main drivers of conflict, and topics such as the excessive use of violence by the Syrian regime are still been avoided (Aljazeera 2016). Moreover, the dialogue is still monopolised by proxy actors, with limited space for Syrians to have a conducive dialogue rendering the official peace talks ineffective.

Despite this, attempts continue to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict and assist communities within Syria's ethnically and religiously diverse society by finding commonalities and bridges to a more peaceful future. While discussions in Geneva have been seriously impacted by the pandemic (Pedersen 2020; Daily Sabah 2020; Thépaut 2020), the shift towards an OPD in Syria has presented a number of opportunities and challenges.

Firstly, shifting to OPD has allowed previously impossible face-to-face dialogue between the warring parties. This has had a particular effect on the Preparatory Constitutional Drafting dialogue which was previously facilitated behind closed doors with neither party ever meeting face to face (Anonymous 2020). The dialogue was conducted by intermediaries. However, during COVID-19, an online session was organised ahead of the Geneva peace talks where, for the first time, participants could see and hear each other, and discuss issues together without the need for intermediaries (Anonymous 2020).

Outside of the Geneva process, COVID-19 has presented mixed opportunities for unofficial peace dialogues. Prior to COVID-19, informal dialogue between NGOs and CSOs typically occurred in online spaces given the geographical spread of participants and the high cost associated with travel and coordination to host meetings in person. However, as OPD become the norm, the diversity of CSOs engaged in the informal dialogue process is improved and spaces for intergroup dialogue are created (Al-Kuwatli 2020).

In contrast, in cases where dialogue is typically held face-to-face, OPD has presented better representation opportunities. In June 2020, the European Union (EU) and the United Nations hosted the fourth Brussels conference on Syria. The conference that used to happen face to face, was hosted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the conference being held virtually, organisers praise the effort as *impressive* as it has reached out to more CSOs through two days of virtual dialogue (Council of the EU 2020). The consultation process, which enabled the participation of more than 1400 organisation, suggests that it has fostered a wider range of perspectives than prior to the use of OPD. This is important because although the locals in Syria are vocal about their opinions, they still fail to reach the peace processes (The British Council 2016). Accordingly, and given the success of the virtual dialogue, 'the EU also launched an online consultative space for Syrian civil society to promote engagement beyond the Brussels Conferences' (Council of the EU 2020).

Furthermore, the participation of women in peace talks on Syria has been limited and largely tokenistic, while women who managed to secure a place on the table had limited roles (Asaf 2017). This necessitated the creation of informal spaces for women to meet face to face at least once a year to work on peacebuilding and address issues of women's representation in peace talks. However, Mansour (2020) highlights the challenges and costs of organising conferences to host dialogues for Syrian women to discuss issues of representation in peace talks. Based on this, OPD induced by COVID-19, thus may present an opportunity to include more voices in these informal talks, as spaces for face-to-face dialogue are restricted due to the pandemic.

However, there are challenges arising from moving some informal dialogue to online platforms. In one interview, it was highlighted that moving some informal talks after COVID-19 to online settings had taken a different format. The dialogue session would be limited to 1–2 hours over Fridays and Saturdays for an entire month. The workshops were conducted for the same people involved prior to COVID-19 and no new participants were added to the dialogue. This format was not received well and resulted in a lot of absences from other members (Helmi 2020).

In summary, while prior to COVID-19, online methods were used to facilitate dialogue between Syrian parties, since COVID-19, OPD has increased the possibility for new participants to join and interact effectively at both formal and informal levels, as physical spaces are restricted. While challenges were experienced when facilitating dialogue, these can be seen as teething issues and not a challenge of OPD itself, but rather the way that these talks were facilitated.

Yemen

The current conflict in Yemen began with the collapse of the national dialogue conference after Yemenis took to the streets to demand change as part of the Arab Spring regional movement in 2015 (Edwards 2016). The failure to implement some of the recommendations of the national dialogue conference, which led to its collapse, was followed by the withdrawal of Houthis, an ethnoreligious Shia group from Yemen's Saada province, from the process (Al-Monitor 2016; Dumm 2010; Edwards 2016; Fraihat 2011; Freeman 2009). Houthi rebels quickly captured the capital Sana'a and placed President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi under house arrest. In response, the Saudi-backed coalition began a military campaign in defence of Hadi and to counter the increasing Iranian influence in the region, rendering the conflict a proxy war (Edwards 2016).

Despite the conflict's protraction, preparations for peace talks have begun, albeit slowly and often interrupted by increased violence. Yemen's peacebuilding dialogue sometimes takes place virtually on online platforms due to the dispersal of those

involved in the process.

Moreover, and more relevantly, issues with physical space and safety encouraged the inception of innovative, interactive, and technology-based solutions to systematically open dialogue between those affected by the conflict in Yemen. These solutions aim to open dialogue between those affected by the conflict beyond combatants and those not involved formally in peace talks in Yemen. The process was always meant to take place virtually and anonymously to increase transparency, participation, reach, and representation to inform the UN's approach in the Yemen peace process (DPPA Politically Speaking 2020; Relief Web 2020; Anonymous 2020).

However, since the emergence of COVID-19, the use of online communication tools has become the primary method of dialogue facilitation. The special UN envoy Martin Griffiths, based in Jordan, has begun hosting all talks with conflict parties as part of the preparatory and consultative process prior to the official peace talks through online teleconferencing (Al-Batati 2020).

Furthermore, and as a result of the pandemic, a unilateral ceasefire by Saudi Arabia, in addition to international calls for local ceasefires, offered conditions for true peacebuilding dialogue (Mashour 2020). To seize such opportunity, the majority of the peacebuilding work shifted from direct and physical contact to online meetings, interviews, and consultations. Interviewees with those involved in these consultations confirmed that the reduced cost of hosting such meetings poses new opportunities. Yet, while OPD is easier and faster to organise, some participants lack the technological capacity to join such nuanced spaces. Further, internet penetration and quality remain amongst the biggest challenges to OPD in Yemen, with many people yet to have access to a mobile phone (DPPA Politically Speaking 2020; Anonymous 2020; Spearing et al. 2020). It is here that peacetech offers a solution to respond to this challenge, as the concept promotes the distribution of technology and training, enhancing the capacity of actors in remote and poorly connected areas to participate in dialogues.

Interviewees also reported challenges when facilitating dialogue with big groups and ensuring a safe space, especially when discussing sensitive topics. However, as participants are dispersed globally with accompanying time-zone differences, dialogue sessions are often broken down into smaller groups addressing issues of dialogue facilitation and space safety (Mashour 2020). In such smaller groups, OPD provided a safe space for participants to discuss sensitive issues openly and freely without restrictions.

Moreover, prior to COVID-19, the number of UN-sponsored peace talks that involved public and notable figures, especially women, was limited and dialogue was often fruitless (Anonymous 2020; Caruso 2020). However, interviewees reported

that OPD promoted the inclusion of participants who typically are excluded from talks. According to participants, as online dialogues became more common, it provided a convenient space for more meaningful and effective women's participation as meetings, interviews, and workshops are now held weekly. They also reported that OPD offers flexibility to mothers with household responsibilities and better reach to remote areas but only for those with a good internet connection (Mashhour 2020; Anonymous 2020).

Furthermore, interviewees on a broader social level argued that some participants' level of engagement with dialogue was not as high as in physical meetings (*ibid.*). Online meetings impeded dialogue on a personal level, where it is imperative to build a personal link between participants for an effective dialogue (Anonymous 2020). In countries such as Yemen, where tribe and families remain key social indicators, these challenges could present a significant obstacle to dialogue. Further, most online meetings conclude without a written agreement unlike face-to-face meetings, rendering some meetings tokenistic and non-abiding (*ibid.*).

However, while these challenges are considerable at this early stage, it will take some time for participants to get used to and engage fully with OPD, and if it is facilitated well, it can produce written minutes and agreements. As suggested by interviewees, 'on a broader scale, OPD improved the overall intergroup peacebuilding as participants represent various political, social and religious backgrounds discussing common issues and working towards a positive outcome' (Mashhour 2020).

South Caucasus

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the sovereignty, borders, and geopolitical alignment of some of the territories in the South Caucasus region in dispute (Peterson 2008; de Waal 2010). In particular, the ethnic and territorial conflict over the disputed region of Nagorny Karabakh, a simmering conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, remains unresolved since the early 1990s (de Waal 2010). An escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in July 2020 intensified already aggressive posturing leaving limited prospect for peace between the two countries (Stronski 2020).

In a further example, the 1992–93 Georgian-Abkhaz war, which formally ended with a ceasefire in 1994, marked only the beginnings of a decades-long conflict, with Abkhazia unilaterally declaring independence from Georgia in 1999 (Conciliation Resources n.d.; de Waal 2010). In 2008, Russian forces invaded Georgia in support of South Ossetian separatists with significant impacts on the conflict in Abkhazia. Russia recognised both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, while both regions are considered occupied territories by the Georgian government (de Waal 2018; Civil Georgia 2008).

COVID-19 has significantly impacted peace talks for these South Caucasian conflicts. The official 51st peace talks between Georgia and Abkhazia were postponed mid-March due to the pandemic (Civil Georgia 2020). In Nagorny Karabakh, only high-level online meetings between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan have been organised with more scheduled in the future (OSCE 2020). However, given the limited access to such high-level meetings, this research will focus specifically on unofficial peacebuilding dialogue and inter-community dialogue.

While the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges to official peace talks, the pandemic is providing opportunities for inter-community peacebuilding dialogue in the South Caucasus, a process traditionally facilitated by INGOs. This section is based on a conversation with a non-profit International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) professional, managing two projects in the South Caucasus. The names of the interviewee, NGOs and the INGO are anonymised as requested.

In one peacebuilding project, Abkhaz and Georgian CSOs reached out to their colleagues across the conflict divide to share knowledge on ways to adapt peacebuilding work in the face of the pandemic – an unprecedented step where communication is typically initiated by the INGO facilitating the project.

Initiatives by Georgian and Abkhazian NGOs have encouraged INGOs to organise a wider online dialogue between a variety of local partners across the South Caucasus to share their experiences with COVID-19. According to organisers, OPD has provided a novel opportunity for partners to meet online together, share expertise and work towards a shared and common goal through a semi-facilitated dialogue process. This is especially important as bilateral meetings between the partners are irregular and are limited by the need to meet in third contexts and the risks of being seen as associating with the ‘enemy’. OPD then has clearly facilitated the inclusion of some partners from the South Caucasus. Moreover, interviewees reported that utilising OPD in a regional way also reduces tensions and suspicions that can affect bilateral discussions.

Opening such a substitute virtual communicative dialogue space between grassroots journalists from across the region is possible and can be considered a peacebuilding action in and of itself as it encourages effective dialogue, listening, learning, and sharing without judgement.

OPD also presents opportunities regarding the ownership and control of dialogues. Facilitators of OPD in the South Caucasus credit the success of their OPD programmes to OPD’s participatory nature. As calls were online, talks were more informal, with no set agenda by the INGO or expected output such as a proposal or a policy. Furthermore, while participants were transparent and critical of some elements of OPD in their respective contexts, they uniformly reported that OPD is

both cheaper and easier than physical meetings, especially as some participants reside in remote and isolated areas where travel is difficult.

However, again, it must be noted that interviewees reported that internet penetration is not the same across all countries in the region. Additionally, some partners reside in remote areas with limited internet connectivity, rendering them marginalised from the dialogue. Facilitators argue that the quality of the internet connection is also crucial to the genuine participation of participants, especially as these calls require high bandwidth due to the number of participants per call.

Summary

In the three case studies above, COVID-19 and the increased use and reliance on OPD have ensured official peace talks are not interrupted or collapsed while providing new opportunities for the inclusion of the typically marginalised in unofficial peacebuilding dialogues. OPD can allow for genuine local and grassroots peacebuilding to flourish, potentially bringing communities across conflict divides, especially during times of reduced conflict (United Nations News 2020). Online peace talks have given the opportunity to actors not previously involved in peace talks due to travel restrictions to join these talks (Ansorg & Strasheim 2020).

As discussed by Pinet (2020), and prior to COVID-19, international-led peace initiatives often lack a systematic approach for the inclusion of local actors, which often results in interventions that are not conflict-sensitive and with limited buy-in from the targeted community as opposed to local-led initiatives.

However, OPD can be seen as offering some optimism for local and national grassroots level peacebuilding. While international attention is focused on domestic rather than broader geopolitical issues, OPD can facilitate a safer, holistic dialogue removed from the influence of world politics (Ansorg & Strasheim 2020). This is vitally important as ‘a core principle of both democracy and peacebuilding is inclusion, in particular of minority voices and unpopular viewpoints, to offset the dangers of domination and tyranny of majorities’ (Bickmore 2014, 556).

Interviewees across the contexts reported in this study highlighted that moving peacebuilding dialogue to online platforms is easier to organise, provides a safer place at times than physical space, and requires little investment compared to in-person dialogue. Additionally, facilitators argue that the reduced costs of running such dialogue online simplifies the replication of such sessions to include more regions and contexts, contributing to a broader peacebuilding process.

Nevertheless, as some have complained that challenges of lost human interaction

could become significant roadblocks, especially in tribe- and family-centred cultures, facilitation methodologies must be adapted (Bell et al. 2020; Ansorg & Strasheim 2020). OPD facilitators are already addressing these challenges by breaking down dialogue into smaller groups.

Additionally, concerns were raised about OPD being dominated by a certain class, further amplifying gender and class divides, which are prevalent throughout the development sector (Hernandez & Roberts 2018).

While challenges are significant, that only speaks to the importance of empirically understanding them and finding novel solutions to them. The recommendations below are an attempt to begin this process.

Recommendations

Adopting a Participatory Approach to Peacebuilding Dialogue

Certain recommendations and preparations are required for conducive OPD. The adoption of participatory methods in conducting OPD and its attention to dialogue and meaningful participation is imperative to address issues of unjust power structures, power imbalances, typical marginalisation of unrepresented and hard-to-reach communities affected by war and conflict (Beaton et al. 2017; Mesa-Vélez 2019; Incerti-Théry 2016; McKay 2011). Additionally, OPD participants should be involved throughout the peacebuilding process in framing questions, identifying problems and proposing potential solutions. This is meant to empower participants and increase their ownership of the process, producing a more relevant outcome.

PAR is considered a critical component of local peacebuilding as it contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics and root causes of conflict (Life & Peace Institute 2016). Further, through collaboration, knowledge-sharing and solution-finding, online dialogue and the acknowledgement of participants as agents of change, peacebuilders can transform the dialogue process, creating a space for listening to others (Beaton et al. 2017; Marzi 2020; Burns et al. 2012; McKay 2011; Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). This gives authenticity and legitimacy to the dialogic process.

Participatory methodologies, however, can be tokenistic and result in failures by some facilitators to address power issues among participants (Cooke & Kothari 2001). The same issue is prevalent in bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding, where social inequalities are replicated, and dialogue and participation are monopolised by certain groups (Olarte Delgado 2019). Online tools can also inadvertently amplify existing marginalisation and disadvantages (Hernandez & Roberts 2018). It is therefore important for organisers to introduce self-reflection sessions to unpack and analyse power dynamics in addition to assessing participation quality (Kemmis & McTaggart

2005). Further, to manage power relations, it is advisable to ensure groups are from the same social status (Quintiliani et al. 2011).

Adopting a Blended Approach

To address issues of power imbalances and concerns about the dialogue domination by certain classes, power imbalances, and potential issues of amplified marginalisation, peacebuilders should focus on the typically marginalised and include people with limited or without internet access. It is thus, recommended to combine OPD with face-to-face dialogue whenever possible, which Hernandez and Roberts (2018, 11) refer to as a 'blended approach.'

Building Capacity of Locals

Given that COVID-19 restricts options for face-to-face dialogue, this blended approach may require building capacities of local peacebuilders so they can engage fully with the various phases of planning and implementation of OPD, increasing their ownership of OPDs (Leonardsson & Rudd 2015). Building this capacity would require utilising peacetech by providing technologies, such as laptops and other tools, as a component of peacebuilding practice. After COVID-19, an initiative by Shift Power for Peace provides laptops and other tools to local peacebuilders so they can move their work online (Shift Power For Peace, n.d.).

Similarly, in the South Caucasus, the project was aligned to respond to the challenges caused by COVID-19 by providing additional funding to partners and provide laptops, internet connectivity, and Zoom and other software licences. It was noted, however, that it is imperative to give local partners the agency to choose internet and mobile providers as they are best informed about the quality in their respective locations.

To improve OPD facilitation skills and overcome some of the challenges raised in the case studies, OPD facilitators and participants should also undergo training on inclusion and effective dialogue such as sharing, listening, and inquiring prior to conducting sessions (Escobar et al. 2014; Quintiliani et al. 2011). Furthermore, facilitators should query their participants' assumptions and prejudices to achieve understanding as part of the dialogical process for peacebuilding (Ballantyne 2004).

Encouraging Intergroup Dialogue to Counter Identity Polarisation

Intergroup dialogue seeks to bring and engage participants from diverse and different backgrounds with a history of tension to promote social justice through building relationships and collective learning (Dessel et al. 2006; Nagda et al. 2012; Frantell et al. 2019). Similarly, intercultural dialogue aims to bring societies, communities, and individuals to enable the exchange of disparities and differences instead of focusing on

commonalities (Ganesh & Zoller 2012; Hardy & Hussain 2017).

Since participatory methodologies, peacebuilding, and conflict transformation all require collective learning and building bridges between polarised communities, it is thus typical to embed intergroup/intercultural dialogue within OPDs in order to increase its efficiency (Phipps 2014). This overlap, although rarely highlighted, can provide limitless opportunities in online settings, as seen in Yemen and South Caucasus case studies.

Further, when intergroup dialogue is used in online settings, it can provide anonymity to participants in divided communities which can simplify the adoption of intergroup dialogue to improve social cohesion and lasting reconciliation. Peacebuilders can promote social cohesion by encouraging participants to rely on problem-solving dialogue, through a creative process of collective learning and exploration of problem and opportunities towards reaching a mutual understanding rather than divisive debates in OPD (Lawson 2015; Ballantyne 2004).

Moreover, since intergroup dialogue assumes conflict is embedded within social structures, the engagement with conflict dynamics between groups can harness an environment of mutual understanding, empower members to work and collaborate together, build bridges across the divide and identify solutions and methods to engage with conflicts (Dessel et al. 2006; Nagda et al. 2012; Frantell et al. 2019). In the South Caucasus, facilitators argue that dialogue can be more inclusive and effective if participants are working towards a specific and common issue.

However, intergroup/intercultural dialogue requires certain conditions to be successful. This dialogue can be meaningless during times of heightened conflict and loss of identity (Phipps 2014). Further, it is argued that intergroup dialogue is likely to fail if it avoids the direct and respectful engagement with the sensitive root causes of conflict (Phipps 2014; Hardy & Hussain 2017).

Furthermore, for successful intergroup dialogue, facilitators should ensure emancipatory participation, participants should also have the will and time to participate (Quintiliani et al. 2011; Mesa-Vélez 2019; Incerti-Théry 2016). However, inclusion and representation should be done carefully as too much emphasis can create a sense of equalness which diverts dialogue on existing exclusions (Ganesh & Holmes 2011).

Ensuring A Safe Virtual Space

Conducive peacebuilding dialogue necessitates the creation of a safe space for participants to freely and collaboratively share and listen. Online and virtual spaces in comparison to offline spaces, provide an added level of unobtrusiveness and

anonymity, empowering vulnerable groups in highly polarised environments and reducing potential biases (Hewson 2015).

In Syria, openly sharing political views can result in arrests; by using online tools, participants can join anonymously using aliases (Al-Kuwatli 2020). However, building trust between anonymous participants would require time. Organisers should thus create this safe space and allow time to build trust between participants. Organisers should also encourage the use of video solutions whenever possible to minimise extra-linguistic limitations and address issues inherent to audio calls such as the lack of understanding over participants' intentions and level of honesty.

In an OPD session between Cambodian American survivors and Khmer Rouge perpetrators, one facilitator granted the success of OPD to participants being patient in building trust, willing to listen to explanations, and refusing to make accusations, which 'provides one model for how dialogue can help (re)humanise those who have committed gross crimes against humanity' (Quintiliani et al. 2011, 506). It was also reported that the success of online dialogue was due to the inclusivity, and involvement of various groups in the process is highlighted among conditions essential for a true and genuine dialogue.

In the South Caucasus, partners from parties involved in conflicts were willing to join online dialogues as facilitators guaranteed a safe space. This safe space was created based on trust between the facilitators and the participants, where facilitators can vouch for other participants. Facilitators argue that online meetings could replace in-person meetings if participants knew each other beforehand, as building and normalising new relationships between conflict parties online is time-consuming, yet necessary.

Finally, the expansion of technological and artificial-intelligence mediated dialogue, similar to that organised for Yemen, which ensures the safety of participants and improves the inclusivity of the peace process to other contexts, is encouraged. The use of artificial-intelligence can also overcome issues of moderation and scaling of large-scale peacebuilding dialogues (DPPA Politically Speaking 2020).

Conclusion

While COVID-19 has resulted in reduced conflicts and ceasefires in some contexts, paving the way to genuine peacebuilding, it has also disrupted peacebuilding work. At the time where the true implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for peacebuilding dialogue continue to emerge, this research provides an early understanding of the implications of moving peacebuilding dialogue to online platforms due to COVID-19. Further, this study fills the knowledge gap in knowledge of the new opportunities and

challenges facing peacebuilders and peace talks organisers arising from this shift.

The case studies in this research allow us to conclude that moving peacebuilding dialogue to online settings because of COVID-19 prevents the collapse of peacebuilding work and provides opportunities for inclusion of some typically marginalised groups. OPDs are effortless to organise and cost less than face-to-face meetings, allowing for expansion. This can contribute to more effective peacebuilding and lasting reconciliation.

By adopting a participatory research methodology, this research's true power lies in its theory and practice intersectionality to produce an actionable and practical solution to those affected by moving dialogue to online settings. Consequently, although this research argues that the pandemic offers some prospects for more inclusive peacebuilding dialogue, organisers and facilitators should follow a set of recommendations to avoid amplifying the marginalisation of some groups – such as those with no internet connectivity. Facilitators should adopt a participatory approach to dialogue and give a concerted focus to the typically marginalised. This also means participants are involved throughout the peacebuilding process, which is expected to increase ownership and efficacy of OPDs.

To address issues of digital marginalisation, peacebuilding organisers should adopt a 'blended' approach to online dialogue by embedding an accompanying offline dialogue whenever possible. This 'blended' approach might require building the capacity of local peacebuilders by providing necessary digital tools such as laptops. Moreover, facilitators should provide conditions to allow emancipatory participation and provide spaces for personal-level dialogue to improve OPDs.

COVID-19 and OPD provide an opportunity for an emancipatory intergroup dialogue that contributes to lasting reconciliation and effective peacebuilding since online tools can ensure the anonymity of participants as opposed to face-to-face dialogue. Further, successful intergroup dialogue requires the promotion of dialogue instead of debates and discussions. Dialogue encourages collective learning, listening, mutual understanding and exploration of problems and opportunities, all leading to better social cohesion. However, while these recommendations are not exclusive to OPD, they could benefit and contribute to better peacebuilding dialogues, especially in online settings, as opposed to debates that can be divisive. These recommendations also offer an opportunity to reflect and improve peacebuilding work.

Although this article presents an early understanding of peacebuilding during COVID-19, further studies are needed to explore contexts where the internet is not widely available, contrary to the case studies of this research. Further, questions on how to scale up grassroots and local-level OPD and improve synergies and links

between different tracks of official peace talks are likely to emerge if physical spaces continue to be restricted. Further studies should also focus on different contexts where COVID-19 resulted in heightened conflicts, which are likely to present dissimilar outcomes to those of this research.

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