

# BUILD PEACE

## WHITE PAPER Technology and Peacebuilding Learning and Evaluation

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## Introduction

A growing number of actors are heeding the UN High Level Panel's call for a 'data revolution' in its post-2015 development agenda (UN High Level Panel 2013). In the peacebuilding field, implementers and evaluators are exploring ways to use (digital) data generated through new information and communication technologies (ICT) to understand and improve the impact of peacebuilding activities. In spite of the increasing use of new technologies in peacebuilding pilot projects and evaluation, we do not know whether they have, in fact, increased peacebuilding's effectiveness.<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that ICTs have the potential to address several information problems that international peacebuilding faces, but only if they are accompanied by other mechanisms. To motivate respondents to use the technology, peacebuilding organizations<sup>3</sup> must identify respondents' specific intrinsic and extrinsic incentives and accompany recipients as they incorporate technology into their daily routines. Similar to information produced by other means, peacebuilding organizations and evaluators must develop mechanisms to analyse and adapt to information produced via new technologies. Motivations and incentives to produce and react to information – not technological capability – are the key factors that must be addressed in order to facilitate greater use of new technology in peacebuilding programming and evaluation.

## The Importance of Feedback in Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding refers to a 'range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development.' (OECD-DAC 2012: 20). The overall ambition of peacebuilding is vague and far-reaching, involving laying the 'foundations for sustainable peace and development'. In countries that are emerging from war or facing its escalation, sustainable peace and development seem a distant dream. We do not know which specific constellation of institutions will create sustainable peace and development, although peacebuilding is grounded in the idea that they will eventually embody liberal democracy, market-based economies, and rule of law. Each organization that does peacebuilding adopts an implicit or explicit *theory of change* to explain how their activities aim to affect these 'foundations' for sustainable peace.

To be effective peacebuilders, organizations should regularly question the relevance of their theory of change to the specific institutions and behaviours in the conflict-affected country, and adjust their approach as the dynamics change. Organizations that want to engage in peacebuilding work over a period of several years have to undergo numerous adjustments and changes, both at the operational level and at the strategic level, as the country undergoes small and large transformations.

To adjust to the evolving context and evaluate the relevance of their theory of change, organizations need regular feedback from the different people that its activities directly and indirectly affect. In addition, the organization needs to process this feedback in a way that is relatively non-defensive and enables the organization to alter its behaviour (Argyris 1992). This 'learning behaviour' is challenging for all organizations, but is particularly challenging for organizations that do international peacebuilding work because of the 'broken feedback loop' of international aid (Martens et al. 2002). The multilateral organizations, donor governments,

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper we use 'technologies' or 'new technologies' to mean the variety of information and communication technologies such as the web, mobile phones, social media and any combination of these that are increasingly being used in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding contexts.

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper, 'peacebuilding organizations' are defined as 'any organization aiming to impact the causes of peace' (Campbell 2008: 20), where the causes of peace refer to the 'norms, behaviour and institutions that are likely to create momentum for sustainable peace in a particular country' (Campbell 2008: 22).

and non-governmental organizations that do peacebuilding work are primarily accountable to their headquarters, not to their beneficiaries in the country. This means that the normal feedback loop between recipient and provider is broken, leaving the organization without a systematic mechanism to receive information about its relevance to the evolving context or its effect on it, and the recipient without the potential to take ownership of the peacebuilding process.

## **How Technology Could Enable More Responsive and Effective Peacebuilding**

Technology has the potential to help close the feedback loop between the recipient and provider of peacebuilding and enable more reflective and effective peacebuilding. It can do this in three possible ways: 1) by providing peacebuilding organizations with regular information from recipients on the effects of their activities and changes in their target context; 2) by providing recipients and observers with the potential to convey information about the effect of their peacebuilding activities; and 3) by providing external evaluators with information about an organization's activities and effects and changes in the target context. In addition to these potential information pathways that ICT provides, closing the feedback loop of international peacebuilding aid requires significant efforts to motivate respondents to provide relevant information and for this information to be analysed and acted upon in a way that furthers locally-relevant peacebuilding.

### ***First Missing Link: Motivating the Use of Technology for Peacebuilding***

Peacebuilding monitoring and evaluation helps uncover whether a project is aligned with its context as well as its impact on that context. Current practice in the field seeks to leverage new technologies to help close the gap between an organization's intended and actual effect by enabling affected populations to provide feedback to the organization. Members of the affected population, on devices or phones received from peacebuilding organisations, use various channels (text messages, free hotlines, emails) to voice their opinions and perceptions. As well as allowing for this kind of data to be collected faster and on a potentially larger scale, these new technologies enable the population to provide information in a variety of data formats, 'ranging from simple text to audio, photos or video files' (Költzow 2013: 10).

One emerging practice in the use of ICTs for peacebuilding is 'crowdsourced monitoring systems' of human rights violations, where citizens – armed only with cell phones – can monitor the effectiveness of these efforts and enable their societies to break out of the conflict trap. Crowdsourcing refers to the aggregation of information from multiple, decentralised sources. Such systems have the potential to help address one of the major problems of international interventions: the lack of feedback from and accountability to the populations these interventions aim to help. The majority of pilot projects have used geo-enabled crisis mapping and crowdsourcing platforms for early warning and conflict prevention purposes, such as the Uwiano platform in Kenya for example (Musila 2013), or the Blue Nile Participatory Digital Mapping project that included the CRMA platform, Frontline SMS and Ushahidi (Puig Larrauri 2013).

While crowdsourced monitoring systems have much potential to provide valuable information (Oates 2003; Grossman et al 2014; Zurovac et al 2012), a key concern scarcely addressed is how to motivate a large group of the population to adopt this practice so that the resulting information is largely representative of the evolving situation. Although there has been considerable technological innovation that is both accessible and adaptable for a wide variety of development and security needs,<sup>4</sup> individuals and organizations in the affected

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of technologies abound. Among the technologies, Ushahidi, UReport, Frontline SMS, Aid Management Platforms, Mapping for Results, and many more are in use. Beyond the many technology innovations, many technology for development and security meetings have occurred. Crisismappers meetings

contexts can be slow to adopt and adequately implement such technology. In fact, despite high-profile success cases of crowdsourcing, such as Ushahidi, much of the existing technological innovation has not been used in sustainable ways. This raises the question of what incentivizes individuals to participate in providing information through ICTs for development and peacebuilding activities (Blaschke et al 2014) both in the short- and long-run, for which we do not yet have an answer.

Mobile phone crowdsourcing systems have been most prevalent and successful in the wake of crises such as disasters or violence (Crooks and Wise 2013), leaving an open question as to how crowdsourcing technologies could be used in situations with no crisis-based organizing event. Despite the severity of civil violence, much peacebuilding work falls into the non-crisis category and thus begs for greater attention to the process of assembling and motivating crowds. Some research offers ideas on how best to incentivize and as greater attention is devoted to this issue (Blaschke et al 2014; Grossman et al 2013; Van der Windt and Humphreys 2013), the full potential of crowdsourcing systems (or lack thereof) will become much clearer.

### ***Second Missing Link: Analysis, Reflection, Decision-Making, and Action Cycle***

Even in cases where accurate and generally representative data are provided, ICTs are not the silver bullet that will ensure more responsive and effective peacebuilding. The information provided through ICTS needs to be analysed, assessed through a process of critical reflection, evaluated by decision-makers, and translated into action.

Organizations gather information in relation to their organizational targets or aims (Levitt and March: 320). Organizations doing peacebuilding translate these targets into project and activity-level indicators that they monitor. Peacebuilding organizations often gather information that corresponds only to their pre-selected indicators, raising three problems. First, these indicators often focus on the output level, or number of things that the organization has produced or delivered, not the outcome or impact level. Second, even when an organization identifies its outcomes, its focus on its organizational targets and indicators often prevents it from identifying unforeseen direct and indirect effects (whether outcomes or impacts). Third, without information of unforeseen effects, organizations are not able to understand or question the relevance of its *theory of change* to the particular context that they aim to influence. ICTs can potentially help organizations improve an organization's *understanding* of its peacebuilding effects by providing it with feedback from a more representative group of local actors on both direct and indirect effects and changes in the surrounding context.

Once an organization has information, it has to find ways to make sense of this information and its implications for the organization's ambitions. If ICTs provide a broad array of information about an organization's direct and indirect effects on a particular context, an organization has to develop corresponding mechanisms to understand what this information tells them about the relevance of their theory of change to this context, the potential of their activities to achieve this theory of change, and how they could alter or revise their aims and/or activities as a result. External evaluations can help with this process of *critical reflection*, but cannot substitute for an internal process within the peacebuilding organization that asks and answers these questions. The literature on organizational learning argues that this type of reflection is only possible when an organization's leadership and staff approach new information in a non-defensive way and when staff are provided with 'time to think' about the implications of the data for the organization's aims and approach (Argyris 1992).

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have been ongoing for several years now. Beginning as early as 2009, the development aid community – including the U.S. State Department, World Bank, USAID, and others – have convened tech conferences each year. UNDP held a first ICT for M&E workshop in Nairobi in October 2013 where early UNDP implementations were showcased.

Even with a substantial critical reflection process, key *decision-makers* in the organization must still decide what to do with the results of this critical reflection. Decision makers want to understand the direct effect that their decisions will have, particularly if they are making riskier decisions to support more innovative approaches (Gronich 2005). In other words, decision-makers are more likely to support more innovative peacebuilding programming if they have actually seen the potential recipients, the context, and the potential effect of their actions with their own eyes. ICT cannot substitute for lived experience. It can only provide a valuable complement to it. For ICTs to contribute to more innovative and effective peacebuilding, it is likely that they will need to be accompanied by first-hand experience by key decision-makers of the reality that the new information describes.

## **Conclusion**

Technology could serve both as an evaluation tool and as a peacebuilding tool, in that it could lead to more relevant information and serve to enhance the downward accountability of peacebuilding activities. Key considerations have emerged from early evaluations including questions of ownership, sustainability, capacity, 'cultural and political appropriateness', nefarious uses, and conflict sensitivity (Musila 2013; Puig Larrauri 2013), all of which must be considered when deploying various crisis mapping and crowdsourcing technologies. A fuller treatment of such concerns is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, we call greater attention to the dual issues of how to (1) motivate participation in technology and (2) encourage responsible evaluation and adaptation based on information filtered via technology.

## **Discussion questions**

- How can individuals and organizations be motivated consistently to use technology?
- How can decision makers be incentivized to evaluate meaningfully information from technology and incorporate into future activities?
- What best practice principles could we learn from early uses of technology for monitoring and impact evaluation?

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