Building Back Better in the Digital Era:

Local peacebuilders on digital technologies and the power of social media

CIVIL SOCIETY
PLATFORM
FOR PEACEBUILDING
AND STATEBUILDING

About us

The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) is an international, member-led network that brings together civil society organisations (CSOs) from the Global North and the Global South, supporting conflict and crisis prevention, peacebuilding and statebuilding in over 30 fragile and conflict-affected countries (FCAS). CSPPS is also the constituency representing civil society within the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS). The IDPS is a tripartite, international network, comprised of CSPPS, the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) - consisting of 30 OECD countries as well as international agencies and organisations - and the g7+ (an intergovernmental organisation of 20 fragile and conflict-affected countries). CSPPS sustains in-country interventions, by ensuring a strategic and capacity assistance aiming at amplifying the voice of civil society both within the International Dialogue and outside its realm.

Context

Globally, NGOs have increasingly been using digital technologies (DT), and more specifically social media to deliver their messages, gain additional interest from potential stakeholders, inculcate sympathizers, propagate their volunteer force, build relationships with community peers and political figures, generate revenue for their outreach efforts etc. This report looks at how the wider CSPPS membership -established civil society organisations- has taken advantage of the interactive and mobilizing potential of digital technologies and social media, and used it to strengthen organisational capacity – meaning the effective delivery of its mission (leadership and vision, management and planning, fiscal planning and practice, and operational support).

Approach

This report is the result of a collaboration between the wider CSPPS membership and the Secretariat. The report is based on a substantial and comprehensive survey distributed among the membership. Fifty-two CSOs spread over twenty-two countries responded to the survey and shared with us their experience and insight around the digitalisation of peacebuilding.

This report is divided into four sections. The first section presents the data on the various use of digital technologies by CSOs, with a focus on social media. The second section examines the power of digital technologies in peace and conflict contexts according to the existing literature and to our respondents. The third section explores the barriers and challenges peacebuilders experience in the use of digital technologies in their work. The last section presents the wishes for the future and recommendations, both from the respondents and from the underlying analysis of the report.

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have radically impacted our ways of interacting with the world. Global digitalisation has effectively connected people from all over the planet and has bridged cultural divides through social media and other digital innovations.

The Digital Revolution introduced spaces for marginalised voices to make themselves heard and has created ways to enhance civic participation, collective action and accountability. In a way, technological innovation has the capacity to create powerful communities that have the power and the opportunity to build more inclusive and just communities.

On the other hand, we are forced to recognise that digital technologies are also increasingly being used to encourage extremism and incite division through hate speech or the spread of disinformation to only cite a few. Furthermore, the harmful practice of censorship, media manipulation and mass surveillance by authoritarian states, restricting the rights and freedoms of their population and of civil society, is also cause of worry.

Despite this, digital technologies are increasingly being used by peacebuilders to tackle drivers of conflict, to improve programming and communications, to challenge the dominant narratives and to foster social and national cohesion.

The COVID-19 pandemic really highlighted the importance of digital technologies, as peacebuilders have had to rely on them more than ever before. Unfortunately, the pandemic also highlighted the digital divides and social inequalities (e.g. basic internet access) that are leaving many behind and spurred the UN Secretary-General to propose a Roadmap for Digital Inclusion.

COVID-19, forcing us to social distance has also impacted our ways to socialize, as in-person dialogue was highly restricted. Many of us turned towards social media and online platforms as a means to connect. Where it can be seen as a good thing, social media has also been decried by the United Nations as the nest for the 'infodemic' of misinformation that has been eroding trust globally. It is thus crucial that peacebuilders and the international community learn to leverage current reliance on virtual platforms, take advantage of the possibility they offer, and learn to fight or at the least mitigate its dangers.

This report presents the findings of a large online comprehensive survey distributed among the wider CSPPS membership. The purpose of the report is to map the use of digital technologies by local peacebuilders, with a special focus on the use of social media platforms, and to gain the perspective of local peacebuilders on the role of technologies in their peacebuilding work. We also hope this report will contribute to the ongoing policy discussions around digital inclusion and will contribute to the growing interest of donors on the issue of digital inclusion and peacebuilding.

2. CSPPS and Digital Technologies

The [UN reports](#) that 93 per cent of the world's population live within physical reach of mobile broadband or Internet services, only 53.6 per cent of the world's population now use the Internet, leaving an estimated 3.6 billion without access. The least developed countries are the least connected, with only 19 per cent of their populations having access to the internet. Because the participants to our survey -local peacebuilders- all operate in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, intersectional issues including poverty, limited infrastructure, digital illiteracy, marginalisation, and restrictive regulatory environments have perpetuated restrictions in their access to the internet and digital technologies.

The existence of these digital divides led us to interrogate our membership on their use of the internet and other digital technologies to understand the needs and know the baseline. This first section presents the findings:

The respondents all said that **internet access and digital technologies were extremely important** for the everyday work of their organisation. However, many local peacebuilders lamented the **poor internet access and poor internet connexion** in their region, which made their work more difficult, especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents from the Democratic Republic of Congo, from the Central African Republic and from Guinea scored the lowest on the question about the quality internet access in their region. Overall, internet access and quality scored a mediocre 3.46 out of 10 across the respondents.

When it comes to **website and the security/privacy** of it: 53% of the respondents said their organisation has a website. Out of them, only 1/7 of their websites possess an SSL certificate, 1/5 of them offer mobile compatibility, and a little under 1/6 has a privacy policy.

When it comes to **outreach and communication**: 29% of the respondents sends newsletters to their network, with the big majority saying their newsletters are send every 3 or four months, and 26% of the respondents said they send fundraising appeals via email.

When it comes to **fundraising**: 31% of the respondents said they accepted online donations: Bank transfers, Western Union, PayPal and mobile payments were the four methods of payment used by the respondents. The respondents that didn't accept mobile donations said they lacked the infrastructure and technical knowledge to put it in place.

When it comes to **internal communication** technologies, webmail, WhatsApp and Telegram (both are messaging apps using internet band connection to work) were the most used media. When it comes to **external communication**, webmail was still the most used form of communication, but Facebook and WhatsApp came high on the list.

Social Media Use Around the CSPPS Membership

As this study centres primarily on the use of social media, we asked questions on their use of major social media platforms.

Facebook is the most used social media platform with 72% of the respondents saying their organisation has a Facebook page. The number of followers varied greatly, with some organisations only having a few hundreds of followers and others having over 30,000 followers. Facebook is also the platform on which the respondents seem to be the most proactive, as 25% said they posted daily, 25% said they poster weekly, 14% said they posted monthly, while the rest said they posted sporadically to never.

Twitter is the second most used platform with 33% of the respondents using Twitter. The number of followers on organisations have on this platform is however way lower, ranging from 10 to 2000 followers. The respondents tweeted very rarely, with an majority answering they tweeted on average once a month.

Instagram was the third most used app with 28% of the respondents using the platform. Similarly to Twitter, the numbers of followers ranged between 50 and 2000, and the respondents posted on average a few times a month.

LinkedIn was the least used platform, with only 21% of the organisations having a LinkedIn page, and using it very rarely.

> *"YWBOD improved its use of social media since 2019. Now we have a staff of two members are working on social media and actually we achieved something in this regard. In 2019, our Facebook followers, for example, were less than 10,000. Now we have over 35,300 followers and it means our recent advocacy campaign on social media for SDG16+ reached many people. There is of course still a problem of expertise as regular social media users in Yemen are not plenty, internet connection is often not available and this makes us facing the challenge that we might have a more advanced level of using social media than our intended beneficiaries."*
> *- **Maged Thabet, Youth Without Borders Organization for Development (Yemen)***

When it comes to the outreach of social media posts, the target of the social media outreach was various. Overall, the respondents said they tried to reach as many people as possible, but within the whole population, two targets came up the most often: national **youth** and national **decision-makers**. Next to these two main targets, *donors* and *potential partner organisations* with similar goals were also listed often. Interestingly, beneficiaries (apart from the youth), were less often cited as specific targets of posts. A possible explanation for this is of course the low level of internet access -or maybe even the low level of digital literacy- of these less young beneficiaries. Maged's boxed testimony expresses similar feelings.

Still on the outreach, 64% of the respondents said they paid attention to the number comments and likes of their posts and tracked the number of page visits. Although the majority said they tried to see from this tracking how posts could be ameliorated for better outreach, only 21% of the respondents said they had a ***social media strategy***. On the other hand, almost 1/3 of the respondents said they did dedicate funding to social media and had a dedicated 'social media person'. Maged's boxed testimony shows the impact of having dedicated social media people, more than doubling the Facebook audience of the organisation in a year time.

3.   Benefits and Risks of DTs

Digital technologies and social media present potential for positive change by enabling the inclusion of marginalised voices and by empowering people and communities to hold their governments and the international community accountable, but it can also divide groups and provide authoritarian governments with the means to further oppress their populations and perpetuate conflict. Either way, we need to recognise the power of social media and other digital technologies in peace and conflict dynamics.

3.1   Risks and Dangers

In the hands of authoritarian governments and conflict actors, digital technologies can present a danger to human rights and be a powerful driver of conflicts.

Governments can use these technologies to undermine civil society organisations and grassroot movements through **censorship and surveillance**. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, repressive governments can use these technologies to push their **propaganda** and undermine grassroot movements and mobilisation. These governments can also use strategies such as internet shutdowns or internet access restrictions, like it has recently been the case in Guinea, as reported by our members in the country:

"*In Guinea, since the presidential elections, we are going through drastic internet restrictions*" *– Mariama Bailo, ODDI-Guinée*

As in many fragile and conflict-affected countries, many CSOs and peacebuilding actors are seen as potential dissidents by the governments, these governments will also use digital technologies as surveillance tools to spy on peacebuilders[1]. Many respondents said the issue of hacking, the stealing of

information and censorship were some of the main issues they had with using social media.

Next to the misuse by authoritarian governments, respondents said they feared digital technologies, and social media in particular was used by violent groups and "trolls", which lead to further polarisation and radicalisation. The prevalent circulation of all kinds of untrue information and hate speech online was a driver of sowing divisions and ever-growing tensions between communities and in some cases was perceived as a threat to the organisation.

"*Advocating for human rights of vulnerable or ethnic groups facing persecution brings in hateful comments and threats to the organization*" - **Davy Nininahazwe**, **Réseau Femmes et Paix** (**Burundi**)

Since the spread of COVID-19 all over the globe, our respondents said that the hate online and the amount of misinformation and disinformation spread on social media was at an all-time high and contributed to the exacerbation of the tensions brought by the economic and social distress caused by the pandemic.

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[1] Amnesty International. (2018). Amnesty International Among Targets of NSO-powered Campaign. (online)

3.2   Benefits for Peace

The decentralised nature of digital technologies and platforms has the power to enable marginalised groups and traditional beneficiaries of peacebuilding initiatives in positive ways by giving them agency and amplifying their voice. In a certain way, social media have the potential to promote peace, civic participation and engagement through collective action.

A recent example of collective action through social media is the use of the #EndSARS tag on Twitter. Twitter served as a co-ordinating platform for oppositional discourse and activist campaigns in Nigeria. During the protests, Twitter was used in at least three ways: to co-ordinate protests, to amplify the voice of the campaign globally and gain attention from the international community, and to berate brands and public figures deemed to be opposed to the movement.

Social media are also widely used in by the Somalian youth, as **Ms Hibo Yasin,** Executive Director from IIDA-Somalia**,** told us. They use the platform to express their views, beliefs and identities, to protests unlawful bills passing in Parliament, to advocate for women's rights and to hold authorities accountable. Although it can be dangerous for the youth, Ms Yasin believes positive social change can come from the young Somalian's use of the platform "they are the hope for the future" she says.

Next, digital technologies are also increasingly used by peacebuilders to optimise their work and strengthen organisational capacity as it contributes to more efficient communication, logistics, project management, as well as accountability.

Social media specifically is a tool used by peacebuilders to increase their visibility, to advocate and to communicate messages in a cost-effective and efficient way. Indeed, all our respondents mentioned that social media platforms had the ability to increase visibility of their peacebuilding efforts, their advocacy work, and their projects, as well as increase networks and participation through connecting local and global efforts, and through involving beneficiaries:

"First, social media enhances the exposure of the organization and its activities, in a cost-effective way, and it gets us more support. Secondly, we are able to raise awareness of many more beneficiaries than those we are directly working with. Thirdly, we can find information of what is happening locally and globally almost instantly, it can make us gain time and resources." – **_Claire Quenum, Floraison (Togo)_**

Social media can is also used as a vessel to promote alternative narratives of peace, counter hate speech efficiently. Online peace messaging on social media is an easy way to promote peacebuilding messages and sensitise people around peacebuilding values. It's a cost-effective and efficient way to promotes peace narratives that can change behaviour and counter disinformation online:
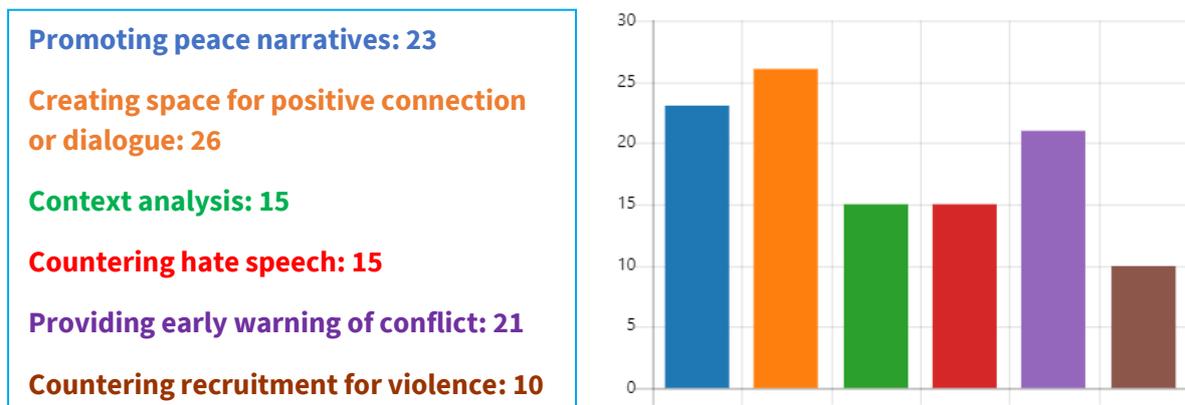
"*The benefit of the social media in today's society is that it reaches more people, it also impacts more people. We grow a wider community of supporters and strategically amplify voices of peace instead of hate speech*." - ***Rhea Mahanta, The Peacebuilding Project (India)***

Next, some of our respondents also told us that through the increased visibility brought by social media, they had seen their numbers of volunteers raise, saying that social media advertising attracted many young people wishing to contribute to peace efforts.

While respondents seemed to agree that social media is useful for visibility, advocacy and even leadership, like showcased hereunder,

"It increases visibility of the organisation, its easy to share organisations vision, goals and activities to wider stakeholders. Its easy tool for advocacy too, it can be used to influence people, increase the support in specific messages […] It's really effective in term of leadership, outreaching, advocacy, management, planning and support. It also helping to enlarge the activities and raises awareness to more people." **-Mohammad Ajmal, Afghans for Progressive Thinking**

the survey also seeked to understand wheter members believed that peacebuilding goals could be achieved through social media. The question asked the respondents to choose the major two goals that could be achieved through social media according to them, here are the results:

Promoting peace narratives: 23

Creating space for positive connection or dialogue: 26

Context analysis: 15

Countering hate speech: 15

Providing early warning of conflict: 21

Countering recruitment for violence: 10

Unsurprisingly, "creating dialogue" and "promoting peace narrative" came first and second. **Tarana Faroqi** from the **Peacebuilding Project** in India put it the best: "*Social media has the potential to cultivate a culture of peace and constructive dialogue among a greater number of the population across national boundaries, build tolerance and widen perspectives.*"

More surprisingly, providing early warning conflicts came close third , while countering hate speech only came in fourth place. We can imagine platforms and tools on social media that could serve to warn about violence and abuses, and as to the extent, small-scale violence might presage larger-scale political violence, social media could be used as an early warning system, but it would require many resources and participants for it to work.

Lastly, when talking about the benefits of digital technologies for Peacebuilding, we should also mention the innovative "Peace Technologies". When it comes to hate speech, the Peace Tech Lab has developed hate speech Lexicons that map, identify and explain inflammatory language on social media while offering alternative words and phrases that can be used to combat the spread of hate speech, and that aim to serve as a resource for local activists and organizations working to stop and prevent hate speech worldwide. Another notable innovation is a virtual reality (VR) experience of the "enemy's" reality that could generate empathy by creating brief but powerful immersive experiences, allowing the user to internalize a message. Although our respondents do not yet have access to these kinds of technologies, they are worth following.

Overall, almost all the respondents said they believed that social media had the potential to bring positive social change, build trust and inspire to take action.

4. Challenges and Barriers

Peacebuilders still face many challenges and barriers before they'll be able to use digital technologies and social media to its full potential. Many of these challenges are directly associated with the fact that they operate in fragile and conflict-affected areas. On the other hand, DT and social media can present users with ethical dilemmas.

A first barrier is the weak technology and poor infrastructure in many developing countries. Bad internet connection, very little percentage of the population having access to the internet, especially in rural areas and the low digital literacy of the general population were listed as highly hindering.

Secondly, peacebuilders willing to use social media efficiently said they struggled to do so because they didn't have the financial resources nor the technical skills to do it. Efficient use of social media requires a strategy and a level of digital literacy that many peacebuilders do not have. However, 87% of the respondents said they were planning on increasing their spending on social media because, as **Ahmed Youssouf** from **MOSC-Comoros** put it "*as a NGO we are part of a bigger picture-globalisation and we must adapt to the new paradigm shift of doing things differently, in accordance to new realitie*s".

On a brighter note, although illiteracy was often cited as a barrier, some respondents said that using voice messages on WhatsApp was an effective and efficient way to overcome this problem.

Another barrier cited were the restrictions of the government on internet access, like it happened in India in 2019, in DRC in 2018 and in Guinea in 2020. Additionally, these kinds of restrictions are usually put when tensions are high and when digital peacebuilding would be the most needed.

A last barrier was that of the ethical question of privacy issues. Many respondents said they refrained from using DT and social media because they feared hackers, the stealing and leaking of sensitive and private information, and government spying.

Although there is there is a tendency to equate digital technology with the internet and connectivity, photography, TV and radio are technologies that definitely still belong in the realm of peacebuilding. Our respondents noted that these technologies still bring many opportunities to deliver peacebuilding messages and we shouldn't be too quick to leave these technologies behind in favor of more innovative ones.

In many contexts in which our peacebuilders operate, radios are still the most accessible, available and used form of media. It's uttermost important to not ignore this fact, in order to not exclude the often most vulnerable groups. Often, it may be most effective to apply a "**hybrid" approach** by combining **radio**, TV, newspapers, **social media** and other digital technologies to spread a message.

5.   The Way Forward?

We asked the respondents what they were hoping for the future and what help they wished to receive from the Platform.

First and foremost, it is clear from the responses from the survey that it is essential to develop and invest in the digital infrastructure in fragile and developing environments. Low internet access and the bad quality of the service calls for investments.

Secondly, governments and the international community should promote and invest in digital literacy programmes to teach the public on how to use digital technologies and on internet safety. These programmes should raise awareness and teach critical thinking skills around online disinformation campaigns. In the future, it is very probable that conflict actors increase their use of technologies and social media to spread messages of hate and cultivate division. Peacebuilders, authorities and the public should have the knowledge and the tools to combat this, and to not fall prey to misinformation campaigns. These literacy programmes could be taught in school.

The international community should hold social media companies accountable for misinformation and disinformation campaigns that are run on their platforms.

The international community should advocate for some form of regulation of the part of these companies: posts that incite hate and violence should be banned and users should be flagged. In the case of COVID-19, there has been a failure to moderate false information related to the spread of the virus, which has resulted in more deaths and exacerbated tensions. Such outcomes need to be prevented in the future.

CSPPS and international donors should increase their support for digital peacebuilding by providing financial and material support to local civil society. Many of the respondents asked for more flexible financial support to help with the payment of internet fees, computers and other technical resources, and man respondents specifically asked for mobile routers or satellite internet, as well as to be able to hire a communications person and develop staff capacity. The respondents also said they wished CSPPS would hold workshops and trainings to help them develop a communications strategy for regular engagement.

Lastly, the members said they hoped CSPPS and the international community would advocate for more internet freedom and hold governments accountable when they restricted internet access, as it was a direct threat to the freedom of expression and freedom of the press

About CSPPS

The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) is a global network of civil society organisations (CSOs) supporting peacebuilding efforts in fragile and conflict-affected settings, jointly striving for inclusive societies and sustainable peace.

Cordaid, as part of its commitment to addressing fragility, hosts the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding. The Secretariat is managed and coordinated by Peter van Sluijs, our beloved Senior Strategist.

Please find hereunder relevant contact information for the Secretariat. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any question you might have.

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