THE STRATEGIC BLIND SPOT

HOW NEGLECTING PEACEBUILDING UNDERMINES GLOBAL SECURITY

CIVIL SOCIETY
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The Strategic Blind Spot

How Neglecting Peacebuilding Undermines Global Security

**A Reflection Paper, commissioned by the Civil Society Platform
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Disclaimer

While this paper incorporates interviewees' perspectives, the arguments developed and views taken are presented here as a reflection paper issued by the <u>Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS).</u>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an era of unprecedented polarisation, the peacebuilding field stands at a crossroads. Across the West, we are witnessing a paradox: while governments pour unprecedented resources into defence budgets in the name of "security," investments in peacebuilding, prevention, and diplomacy are shrinking. The imbalance is striking, where billions flow to hard security while the mechanisms that could prevent conflict at its roots are devoid of resources. This paper argues that these dynamics are not separate but deeply intertwined. The rise in militarisation, the erosion of democratic norms, and the shrinking of civic space are part of the same systemic shift: one that threatens the very foundations of peaceful coexistence.

Framed within this context, this paper examines the global consequences of this drastic shift. How the democratic backslide in the West fuels insecurity worldwide, and how the sidelining of peacebuilding weakens both domestic and international resilience. Through extensive interviews with experts across defence, development, and civil society domains, we trace a pattern. Namely, as trust erodes and uncertainty rises, societies turn toward militarised responses. Responses that, paradoxically, deepen the very instability they seek to contain. The growing dominance of "hard security" has produced a distorted sense of proportionality in public spending and policymaking, where military deterrence is seen as essential, while prevention is treated as optional.

The consequences reach far beyond Western borders. From Venezuela to Timor-Leste, we observe cascading effects where the contraction of civic space, disinformation campaigns, and economic insecurity amplify one another. These interconnected crises are heightened by global information warfare, where digital manipulation fuels polarisation and undermines democratic institutions. The U.S administration's withdrawal from international cooperation and the EU's growing changeover as a prescriptive donor illustrate how fragile the peacebuilding ecosystem has become, trapped between political instrumentalisation and financial scarcity.

This paper speaks directly to the peacebuilding community in its broadest sense, including practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and advocates. It calls for a collective reframing of peacebuilding as a strategic pillar of security, not a soft alternative to it. We argue that peacebuilders must equip themselves with new tools: analytical, communicative, and political, to make a more convincing case for sustained investment in prevention and dialogue. This includes understanding and anticipating the systemic dynamics behind budget cuts, building stronger alliances with defence institutions, and developing clear, evidence-based narratives that show peacebuilding's tangible benefits. For example, according to new data from a working paper published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF)[1], every $1 spent on activities that spur economic growth and political stability (such as making governments more transparent and accountable, creating jobs, and improving public services) can avert spending of up to $103 on a future conflict and its aftermath.

Ultimately, this paper contends that the ongoing and dramatic political and funding shift toward support for military spending globally is not inevitable. It can be countered by reclaiming peacebuilding and conflict prevention as vital components of collective security, one capable of addressing the intertwined crises of trust, governance, and information. By safeguarding spaces for dialogue and rebuilding the legitimacy of multilateralism, peacebuilders and conflict-prevention practitioners can partner with societies and advise their governments to resist the logic of fear and reinvest in the long-term architecture of peace.

Five key areas of action are outlined at the end of this paper:

- Institutionalise conflict prevention as a strategic investment ;
- Reframe peacebuilding as a core component of integrated security policy;
- Strengthen resilience against information warfare and polarisation;
- Protect and expand spaces for dialogue and inclusion;
- Reinforce cooperation across all security actors

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1. Mueller, Hannes, Christopher Rauh, Benjamin R. Seimon, and Raphael A. Espinoza. 2024. The Urgency of Conflict Prevention – A Macroeconomic Perspective. IMF Working Paper No. 2024/256. International Monetary Fund.

INTRODUCTION

We are in a period in which insecurity is no longer only experienced as a risk of war, but as a permanent condition of political, social and economic life. Across Western democracies, rising geopolitical tensions, information warfare, democratic backsliding, economic anxiety and violent conflict are increasing at a record-breaking level, producing a constant sense of threat. Governments are responding by rapidly expanding defence budgets, elevating military preparedness, and prioritising deterrence as the primary lens through which security is understood. At the same time, the very tools designed to prevent conflict, including diplomacy, peacebuilding, development cooperation, and civic engagement, are being deprioritised, defunded, and politically marginalised. This is not a coincidence. It reflects a dramatic shift in how security is framed, who is trusted to produce it, what kinds of knowledge are considered legitimate in policymaking, and, more importantly, the lack of political commitment to peacebuilding.

This paper starts from a simple but uncomfortable observation. Namely, the same forces that are driving the surge in military spending are also reshaping the political environment and the narrative in which peacebuilding operates. They affect not only the resources available to peacebuilding and prevention but also their ability to make their case, influence policy, and remain politically relevant in an era increasingly dominated by fear and militarised logics of security.

We write from the position of a platform[2] that gathers and synthesises the insights of experts, practitioners, researchers, policy analysts, and civil society working across peacebuilding, defence and governance. The arguments in this paper are grounded in extensive exchanges with these experts, who are observing the same trends from very different institutional points, including shrinking civic space, accelerating securitisation, and a growing disconnection between short-term security responses and long-term societal resilience.

We are not arguing against military institutions or denying the necessity of defence in a turbulent world. On the contrary, many of the experts whose perspectives shape this paper work directly with or inside defence and security structures. What we are questioning is something more fundamental: whether a security architecture dominated by hard-security thinking, and detached from social, political, and informational realities, can deliver durable peace and lasting stability. The core question driving this paper is therefore not whether defence is needed, but whether defence, as currently conceived and resourced, is crowding out the very conditions that make peace and security sustainable.

This paper does three things. First, it describes and analyses structural trends reshaping the global security environment, particularly the rise in defence spending, the erosion of demo-

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2. The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) is a member-led international network composed of civil society actors, practitioners, experts and academics from the Global South and Global North who work together on conflict and crisis prevention, peacebuilding and statebuilding. Learn more about our work here.

cratic and civic space, and the growing influence of information warfare. Secondly, the paper weighs how these trends interact to produce a self-reinforcing system in which militarisation, political fear, and institutional fragility feed one another, often to the direct detriment of peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Thirdly, it explores what can be done, both from inside institutions (governments, defence ministries, alliances) and from outside of them (civil society, think tanks, expert platforms, and peacebuilding networks), to reassert the relevance of peacebuilding and conflict prevention in this evolving security landscape. The aim is not to defend peacebuilding as a moral ideal, but to reposition it as a strategic necessity in a world where insecurity is increasingly produced not only by armies, but by polarisation, weak governance, digital manipulation, and the erosion of trust.

I - EXPANSION OF THE DEFENCE BUDGET AND ITS JUSTIFICATIONS

Across Western societies, the dominant political sentiment is one of permanent emergency. Wars in Ukraine and Gaza, tensions with China, fears of terrorism, cyberattacks, energy insecurity, migration, polarisation and political extremism are no longer experienced as isolated crises but as overlapping and accelerating threats. This produces a psychological and political climate in which uncertainty becomes normalised and fear becomes a governing tool.

In this context, expanding military capacity appears rational. Governments invest in deterrence because it is visible, measurable, and politically defensible. The increase in defence budgets seem to offer the promise of control in a world that feels increasingly uncontrollable. Yet, what the expert interviews and the evidence show is that this response is deeply incomplete.

Concretely, a report from the UN Secretary General on 'The Security we Need'[3] published in 2025, explained that military spending reached a record of 2.7 trillion dollars in 2024 and that based on current geopolitical trends, military spending could reach 4.7 to 6.6 trillion dollars by 2035. These amounts seem tremendous and contrast with the cuts in funding for development assistance and humanitarian aid that we are witnessing. More importantly, the report stresses, with supported data, that an increase in military spending does not necessarily lead to more peace and stability, but rather increases risks of conflict through arms races generating political tensions and greater uncertainty.

At the European level, in March 2025, the European Commission presented the ReArm Europe plan/readiness 2030[4], paving the way for up to €800 billion of additional defence spending. In October 2025, the Council adopted a proposal to encourage defence-related investment through the EU budget, making it easier to coordinate funding within Europe's defence technology sector. The plan also calls for increased private investment in the defence industry, with defence now designated as a strategic priority for the European Investment Bank.

This shift, on top of raising important questions of accountability, impacts the cut in Official Development Assistance (ODA) that we are observing in numerous countries such as France, the UK or the US, and is furthered by political discourses emphasising funding on defense as a powerful deterrent against future threats. For example, Ursula von der Leyen (president of the European Commission) during her speech at the European Council meeting in October 2025 stated: *"And this is the goal of the plan that I presented to the leaders last week [ReArm Europe Plan]. Its logic is simple: We want to pull every single financial lever we have to strengthen and fast-track our defence production."*[5] This emphasis on the need to expand military spending comes at the expense of funding for aid, prevention and mitigation

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3. The Security We Need: Rebalancing Military Spending for a Sustainable and Peaceful Future
4. Council of the European Union, Defense: Council agrees positions to incentivise defense-related investments in the EU Budget
5. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/lv/speech_25_739

elements such as diplomacy or support for civil society organisations, social policies, and health investments, which are vital elements of relationships and networks on which peace relies. This dynamic already has and will have dramatic cascading effects. Indeed, according to the OECD, *"anticipated cuts to multilateral organisations may trigger a second wave of funding decreases for the poorest countries and vital services"*.[6]

A. The Underlying Dynamics of Hard Security

Behind this increase in defence budget and specifically military spending, we can observe two dynamics which exacerbate incentives to cut development aid. Both are clear examples of how the democratic backlash that we are observing worldwide is impacting our approach to security and its meaning for defence.

First, some authoritarian regimes are economically benefiting from security through more military capabilities. According to data from SIPRI,[7] in 2023, 6 of the top 100 arms companies were based in the Middle East and their combined arms revenues grew by 18 percent, 9 of the top 100 arms companies were based in China, and the outbreak of the war first in Ukraine and then in Gaza, generated an exponential growth in the arms revenues of companies in the United States, Israel and Russia (with limited data available for the latter). It is interesting to observe here how the arms race directly fuels the economies of countries in which democratic backsliding is happening. Diego Lopes da Silva (Senior Researcher in SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme, Sweden) has examined the relationship between political accountability and levels of military spending. His research shows that constraints on decision-making, especially on executive power, are crucial: participatory legislatures tend to reallocate resources toward social goods rather than the military. In contrast, weak mechanisms of power-sharing and limited budgetary oversight are associated with higher military expenditure and deeper militarisation, which in turn foster processes of autocratisation. Although important exceptions exist (notably Taiwan and Poland), these findings suggest that the global wave of democratic backsliding is itself a driver of the sustained rise in defence spending, as governments respond to security threats in increasingly centralised and less accountable ways.

Second, growing uncertainty and deepening mistrust toward democratic institutions in Western countries are eroding the foundations of social cohesion, public debate, and participatory governance. As Cédric de Coning (Research Professor in the Research Group on Peace, Conflict and Development at NUPI, Norway) argues, at the domestic level, *"watering down civilian oversight of military procurement and discouraging public debate about finding the right balance between expenditure on defence, diplomacy and peacebuilding would mean undermining the essential values of our democratic system. We should not forget that the war in Ukraine and the threat of war elsewhere, e.g. in Greenland, is just one element of a larger effort to undermine our values and political system"* In this sense, winning the peace should not be confined to military victory but understood as the preservation of democratic values and norms, particularly social cohesion, civil identity, and

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6. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_e161f0c5/full-report.html
7. SIPRI: Global Military Spending Surges Amide War, Rising Tensions, and Insecurity

fundamental freedoms. Because war is ultimately "an instrument of larger political contests", citizen participation becomes indispensable to sustaining both security and democratic resilience. A recently published analysis from Safeworld entitled 'Working for Peace in 2026'[8] corroborates these arguments by explaining that *"Elections in different countries in Europe may also see the advance and consolidation of electoral gains for the far-right, bringing with it anti-immigrant, militaristic, anti-gender agendas, and a further rejection of international cooperation and multilateralism"*.

Not only autocratic regimes (Russia, China) benefit from the polarisation and rise in extremism in Western countries, but they are exacerbating it with increased and constant fear of uncertainty (using disinformation and misinformation to influence elections or share propaganda on conflicts, for example). In fact, at the EU level, the Civic Space Report published in 2025[9] highlighted how there are concerning shortcomings in structured civil dialogue and participation in decision-making. The report explains that this dynamic has been exacerbated by foreign threat narratives on the 'other', delegitimising civic actors defending democratic values and rights in their countries, ultimately reinforcing the belief that *"there is a trade-off between freedom and security"* (Civic Space Report, 2025, p.38). Although it can be argued that using the term 'democratic values' in opposition to 'autocratic tendencies' is a framing which pushes countries further apart and reinforces blocs, we want to stress here that we are talking about values of freedom, tolerance, social cohesion and open civic space, which are often shared outside Western-style democracies.

In short, the point made here is that major powers threatening the international peace order are high beneficiaries of the European and, more broadly, the Western shift toward a war economy mindset, creating a narrative away from the norms and values we once claimed to uphold, weakening our most important strength: democratic resilience.

B. The securitisation trap of democracies

This last point on freedom and security leads to what has been framed as the 'securitisation trap' of democracies, namely the risk that the continuous framing of specific issues as direct national threats to justify exceptional measures (such as a drastic increase in military spending, the cut in development assistance and changes in its policy frameworks) can erode democratic institutions, values and rule of law. This dynamic directly threatens multiple freedoms to which citizens in a democracy are entitled (free speech, accountability, transparency), the foundations of their civic space, and the cornerstone of a strong countervailing power. Ultimately, it leaves the door open for greater autocratic drift led by political parties with extremist ideologies, a trend we are already observing in the United States today, as well as in multiple European countries. To illustrate, the latest report from Democratie Monitor, published in 2025,[10] which focuses on the state of democracy in the Netherlands, notes that an increasing number of political proposals are contrary to the constitution. It found that, out of the 45 indicators regarding democratic health, 18 are signalling serious concerns. Among them are "growing support for autocratic leadership",

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8. Daley, S. January 2026. Working for peace in 2026: trends to watch and the role of peacebuilding, Safeworld
9. Civic Space Report 2025
10. https://www.democratiemonitor.nl/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Democratie-Monitor-2025.pdf

"low trust in national parliament", and "pressure on press freedom". This erosion of civic space is corroborated by the latest CIVICUS Monitor data,[11] which shows that major Western democracies such as France, Germany, and Italy have had their civic space ratings downgraded from "Narrowed" to "Obstructed," signalling serious constraints on protest rights, civil society activities, and public dissent.

At the European level, Sonya Reines-Djivanides (Executive Director at EPLO/Belgium) explained that "the reduction in the number of donors and allocated budgets is leading many European donors to be more assertive and will undoubtedly impact the power relationship between donors and partners". Concretely, we see the EU and its members becoming more prescriptive: they value the work of civil society organisations but only as long as it remains within a framework that they shaped, in a prescribed space. Peter van Sluijs (Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Expert, Coordinator Cordaid-CSPPS/The Netherlands) expressed his concern with a relevant example showcasing this trend happening in the Netherlands: the new Ministry's policy framework for cooperation with civil society organisations (2026-2030)[12] explicitly stresses that activities aimed at influencing policy or government actions within the Netherlands will not be supported by this funding. Ultimately, it reduces the civil society's ability to hold governments accountable and restricts the space for divergent opinions, critique and dissent.

Gretchen Baldwin (Senior Researcher in the SIPRI Peace Operations and Conflict Management Programme/Sweden) underscores an additional effect of the securitisation trap. She states, *"military spending increases reflect the fact that countries perceive a high probability of military conflict in the future, which incentivises the choice of militarised conflict management approaches and can ultimately become a self-fulfilling prophecy"*, a point emphasised in most of the exchanges with experts. If we do not diversify our approach to conflict management and keep on addressing strength and power as military capabilities only, we are the ones leading our world to greater conflicts. Narrowing our scope of framing ultimately shapes a new reality in which extremist ideologies on security prevail. Our governments and institutions need to balance deterrence with dialogue, cooperation and conflict management tools developed through peacebuilding and prevention if they want to progress toward sustainable peace, but especially if they want to avoid a destructive and costly war.

Although this erosion and the heightened restriction on civic space are not a trend limited to Western countries, it is undeniable that this backlash in democratic principles in the West impacts national and international priorities of donors and stakeholders, ultimately weakening peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

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11. https://www.democratiemonitor.nl/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Democratie-Monitor-2025.pdf
12. https://www.government.nl/topics/grant-programmes/femfocus-2026-2030

II- DEMOCRATIC EROSION AS A THREAT TO PEACEBUILDING

The first part of this paper showed how the democratic backlash in the West is both a cause and a consequence of the prevailing security narrative and the rise in global military spending. The complex relationship between these three dynamics shapes civil society's understanding of its role, including its rights and duties in our system. The sense of constant state of emergency pushed through fear and uncertainty (arguably embedded in real events) is slowly becoming the new norm and erodes the foundations of multilateralism entrenched in cooperation, diplomacy, prevention and collective actions. Not only does it target the accountability and transparency mechanisms that were established to secure the sustainable peace we had been trying to build after the Cold War, but it directly threatens our views on burden sharing and our approach to the way in which we engage in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. As we have seen, European and Western democracies are considerably weakened at the domestic-level, but internationally, these shifts in norms and priorities have tremendous consequences precisely because we have been building for the past decades on global cooperation and interdependence.

A. Cascading Effect

The following part seeks to highlight the consequences of the West's emphasis on hard security and aims to underscore the importance of interconnectedness, recognising that events in one part of the world do not occur in a vacuum and inevitably generate wider repercussions. The impact of the cuts in development assistance and the diminution of funding for international organisations working in this field will directly impact the stability of numerous countries in fragile settings, as well as 'donor countries'. But more importantly, it will permanently erode our capabilities to defend norms and values and build lasting relationships, which are the foundation for enduring peace. The interconnectedness and multilateral aspect of the contemporary world make it clear that we can't turn a blind eye on what is happening next door or on the other side of the world.

João Boavida (Founder and Executive Director of the Centre of Studies for Peace and Development -CEPAD, Timor-Leste) shared a concrete example of the cascading effects associated with the reallocation of donor resources toward defence spending and the corresponding reduction in investment in conflict prevention and peacebuilding tools: *"As civic space contracts and donor priorities shift away from long-term peacebuilding, the absence of strong and sustained civil society engagement increases Timor-Leste's vulnerability to governance capture, corruption, and transnational organised crime. Organised crime exploits institutional weaknesses and undermines sovereignty by embedding itself within political and economic systems."* This highlights a deeper structural issue: while increased defence spending is often framed as enhancing security in donor countries, it can externalise insecurity in contexts where prevention and peacebuilding capacities are weakened. Boavida further noted that: *"Neglecting local peacebuilding is not a*

neutral omission - it is a strategic risk." Reducing investment in peacebuilding under these conditions creates fertile ground for instability, organised crime, and institutional erosion. These dynamics affect not only civilians in Timor-Leste but also the broader regional and geopolitical environments in which Southeast Asian countries seek to build resilient political and economic foundations.

Beyond Southeast Asia, similar dynamics are evident in Eastern Africa, where reduced investment in preventive diplomacy has allowed tensions related to resources to escalate into regional security crises. Chalachew Worku (Founder and CEO of Positive Peace Ethiopia) shared two concrete examples, noting that Ethiopia's 2024 agreement with Somaliland to secure sea access intensified friction with Somalia and Eritrea, prompting troop mobilisations, proxy dynamics, and shifting regional alliances, notably involving Egypt. Likewise, the long-standing dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan over the Nile River has deepened following the 2025 inauguration of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), without a binding agreement. Competing claims over water security and flood risks have further eroded trust, increasing the risk of militarised responses. These cases highlight a key policy challenge: when multilateral mediation and cooperative resource governance are deprioritised, structural tensions linked to development asymmetries and climate stress are increasingly managed through coercive rather than preventive means, ultimately undermining both regional stability and international security objectives.

B. Information Warfare Shaping Ideologies

Following numerous interviews with experts, it has become clear that there are powerful agents working to disseminate a narrative of uncertainty and fear globally. These powerful agents have a global reach because they evolve in a new ecosystem shaped by increasing digitalisation. While hybrid warfare has been existing for thousands of years (either cognitive, informational or commercial), digitalisation directly impacts its volume and scale, creating a high level of uncertainty due to the difficulty to track and attribute disruptions, which have an impact on the geopolitical order. In this warfare, digital spaces are borderless, and entities (either state or non-state actors) can have a direct link to the population of any country. Countries such as China, Russia and even the United States are in a strategic warfare in which they have purposefully launched influence campaigns. Fabio Daniele (Intelligence Analyst and General Secretary at Sustainable Cooperation for Peace and Security/Italy) explained that nowadays one of the main threats to peacebuilding is information warfare, which also directly targets civil society. It is not only targeting Western societies, destabilising their norms, values, and affecting their vision and understanding of security, but it also targets fragile and conflict-affected settings, encouraging more social polarisation and antagonism toward multilateralism.

Concretely, Jelle Postma (Director at Justice for Prosperity/The Netherlands) explained how the ecosystem of social media in which specific narratives are pushed forward by different actors, systematically instrumentalising similar groups (such as LGBTQ+) to further polarise societies, is a global trend. He shared a striking example that happened in Cote d'Ivoire when

violent social unrest emerged when transpeople were chased down the street and pulled over with gasoline. Jelle's organisation investigated to find out where this sudden violence toward this group was coming from. While scraping social media to track down the emergence of this movement, they found that there was an online debate with a high level of toxicity toward trans people. They kept on going upstream and managed to identify the fire starter: the local influencer spreading disinformation about a fake sexual assault that caused the offline violence was found to be connected to Russian actors. This example illustrates two key dynamics: first, autocratic regimes deploy attacks aimed at destabilising societies and increasing polarisation on a global scale; second, the actors attempting to undermine alliances, cooperation, and peaceful relations are motivated by extremist ideologies and deliberately target specific groups.

The hard-line security measures that we are seeing globally are an indirect consequence of some governments' influence on the digital ecosystem, by generating social unrest, fear, polarisation, and high levels of uncertainty. Ultimately, it leads governing institutions of targeted countries to take on more power to cope with this uncertainty under securitisation narratives to (re)establish order. It leads to the autocratic adrift we are noticing in established democracies.

Jelle Postma and Fabio Daniele both stressed that autocratic regimes such as China and Russia have embarked on a campaign of digital influence as part of a strategic warfare. Investing in countering these narratives is ineffective because the mind does not understand the difference between truth and frequent messages. Jelle Postma stressed that *"the only thing that can really help here is critical thinking skills, which need to be developed and maintained"*, and these should be strengthened at a high level because it is a matter of national security. Government officials need to understand that their own stability is under attack as their populations are being manipulated. He argued that peacebuilding actors analysing and studying cyber warfare should go upstream instead of advocating for massive training of cyber threat intelligence in grassroots organisations, because this would mean that we are already too late in our strategic countering of these narratives. We need governments to become preventive rather than reactive. Fabio Daniele explained that *"for the moment, there are no clear directions taken by Europe because there is little acknowledgement that they (foreign countries) have a clear strategy in mind"*. Europe needs to understand the importance of being able to measure and analyse the scope of the strategy to inform defensive actions that could be taken to ensure societies become more resilient to these threats. While cyber warfare and the strategies behind have been a priority of military institutions as part of their defence strategy (recognising that Western societies are easily influenced and manipulated), they have limited ability to understand the depth of its effectiveness because they lack the relationships with civil society doing research on this and gathering data. Cooperation should be strengthened at this level to design solutions and have cross-learning exchanges, not only to be able to anticipate and build stronger defensive measures, but also to help civil society confront these threats.

III- PRESENTING PEACEBUILDING DIFFERENTLY

This section explores how the peacebuilding actors can engage differently with governing institutions, stakeholders and donors as well as public audiences by rethinking their narratives, leadership structures and modes of cooperation and organisation. Drawing on interview insights and concrete examples, it demonstrates why repositioning peacebuilding as a crucial tool of sustainable peace and security is not merely a communicative exercise, but a strategic tool to enhance its credibility, influence, and effectiveness. This section highlights how actors in the peacebuilding field can strengthen the relevance of their work and its impact in an era increasingly dominated by hard security thinking.

A. A new framing for public relations

A crucially relevant point was raised multiple times during the interviews: the term 'peacebuilding' lacks a clear focus and definition, and is often associated with 'empty promises', which is detrimental to its purpose. Where war narratives are clearer and easier to communicate when a defined threat exists, peacebuilding however, is broad and systemic which makes its narrative harder to articulate.

According to Conciliation Resources[13] *"Peacebuilding seeks to address the underlying causes of conflict, helping people to resolve their differences peacefully and lay the foundations to prevent future violence."* It is *"a long-term process of encouraging people to talk, repairing relationships, and reforming institutions"*. In concrete terms, it requires understanding and dealing with why people fight in the first place and how they are affected by a conflict in order to tackle root causes and move forward. The storytelling behind peacebuilding today isn't unattractive because it is ineffective but because it is not understood by a majority of our policy makers and populations, and often dismissed by military institutions which focus on fighting the threat and not on building peace. Some interviewees argued that the peacebuilding field needs to develop stronger lobbying and communication skills to make its narrative better understood and its work and impact appealing and clear to the populations and our governments.

In this context, framing peacebuilding as a core conflict-prevention tool within a more integrated approach to security and diplomacy (one that relies on alternative mechanisms of conflict management alongside military capabilities) is essential. Peacebuilding should be incorporated in parallel with, and in coordination with, defence and military efforts rather than treated as a separate or secondary domain. It must also be clearly articulated that working in the peacebuilding sector means addressing security challenges through a long-term and sustainable lens aimed at achieving durable peace. To do so effectively, peacebuilding actors must operate in close symbiosis, developing a shared and systemic understanding of the structural drivers of conflict in order to provide policymakers with informed, evidence-based guidance.

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13. https://www.c-r.org/who-we-are/why-peacebuilding/what-peacebuilding

Elizabeth Hume (Executive Director of the Alliance for Peacebuilding/USA) and Sonya Reines-Djvanides (Executive Director of EPLO/Belgium) both emphasised the importance of reshaping the narratives used by peacebuilders when presenting their work and impact. While politicians and military actors often communicate clear and compelling narratives about their objectives and achievements, peacebuilders frequently struggle to resonate with the broader public to prove their role and effectiveness. They argued that peacebuilding efforts must be more practical, clearly linked to pressing needs, and framed in ways that demonstrate impact and tangible benefits. For example, the International Monetary Fund's analysis in *The Urgency of Conflict Prevention: A Macroeconomic Perspective*[14] demonstrates that investments in conflict prevention generate substantial economic returns *"estimating that an initial expenditure of one dollar yields between approximately twenty-six and seventy-five dollars in long-term benefits in contexts without recent violence and up to around one hundred and three dollars in settings emerging from conflict"* underscoring the cost-effectiveness of prioritising proactive peacebuilding over reactive crisis responses.

To illustrate, one of the sources of instability in the West has been the perceived destabilising impact of migration. Peacebuilding narratives could highlight that investing in conflict prevention and programmes that save lives, restore stability, and create opportunities in conflict-affected regions, ultimately reducing displacement and irregular migration. Clear messages such as - peacebuilding and conflict prevention programmes save lives and help people remain safely in their communities - can effectively convey that peacebuilding addresses real political and social challenges, embedding its relevance more firmly in public consciousness. However, Peter van Sluijs (Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Expert, Coordinator Cordaid-CSPPS/The Netherlands) urged caution in how peacebuilding efforts frame the issues they seek to address. He stressed that while it is important to counter the simplistic narratives that spread fear and uncertainty and often take hold in the public consciousness, we should not rely on the same strategies or communication tools. Instead, he argued peacebuilding should focus on raising awareness in a way that is coherent, accessible, and conveys a sense of urgency, while at the same time strengthening the understanding of policymakers and the public regarding the complex, multilayered nature of these issues.

A compelling narrative which shapes our collective understanding of peacebuilding should be a priority because only then will the populations, governments and military institutions understand its relevance to address the multiple crises we are seeing. Narratives and definitions are important because they influence the way in which one is perceived by their interlocutor. Today, we are in an era prioritising 'hard security', building on threat and uncertainty. Consequently, peacebuilding actors should frame their narrative accordingly to spark interest and consideration. We are not advocating here for peacebuilding as 'hard security' but rather as peacebuilding as a tool for enduring security amid rising uncertainty. We emphasise the need for peacebuilding to be understood in a more holistic way and as an integrated element of efforts to sustain peace and security.

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14. https://www.imf.org/en/publications/wp/issues/2024/12/17/the-urgency-of-conflict-prevention-a-macroeconomic-perspective-559143

B. Leaders in peacebuilding

Leadership means the ability to guide and inspire people toward a common goal through influence, motivation and effective decision-making.[15] In the case of the peacebuilding field it can and has been assigned either to a movement, a person, an institution or an organisation. Cedric de Coning argued that *"self-sustainable means imply that societies have developed social institutions that can sustain their peace. Individual leaders are important, but unless we can institutionalise values and processes, peace will not be self-sustainable."* Precisely because the robustness of individuals working in cooperation is furthering progress toward peacebuilding, we argue here that leadership should come from multilateral entities, institutions and alliances because they have the power to frame the current era in which they are, addressing systemic issues.

Existing alliances and coalitions should strengthen their cooperation through a common strategy to preserve a leading role in defending and promoting shared norms and values, notably diplomacy, respect for human rights, and international law, while also shaping new norms within the framework of collective defense.

1. Building cooperation among organisations

During our interviews, practitioners working in both international and local organisations consistently raised a common concern: because peacebuilding is an umbrella term covering a wide range of activities, actors outside the field (such as government representatives, donors, and other parts of civil society) often misunderstand what it actually involves. This lack of clarity about the diversity, specialisation, and complexity of peacebuilding work makes it difficult for funders to distinguish between organisations and to assess their comparative advantages. As a result, donors frequently struggle to identify which actors are best suited for specific interventions, leading to fragmented and inefficient funding decisions.

These problems have been sharply intensified by recent cuts in development assistance and humanitarian aid. Interviewees described how shrinking funding pools have fostered greater mistrust, opportunistic behaviour, and shifts in organisational narratives, as organisations try to survive in a more hostile funding environment. Many acknowledged that these recent trends have reduced cooperation and information-sharing across the sector, dynamics they viewed as counterproductive to peacebuilding but increasingly unavoidable under financial pressure. This systemic concern has been identified by Principles for Peace (2025)[16], which warns that the global peace architecture is approaching a critical turning point, stressing that *"peacebuilding must be designed for systems, not silos"*, cautioning that fragmented mandates and short-term funding cycles undermine cooperation and collective impact.

To mitigate these effects, several interviewees proposed organisational mergers or the creation of alliances and more integrated platforms. Pooling resources and expertise would allow smaller organisations to access larger, multi-year grants that are currently beyond their administrative or financial capacity. This, in turn, would support more sustainable

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15. https://www.salleurl.edu/en/leadership-inspiring-change-driving-success
16. Geneva Incubation Space - The Future of Peacemaking, Outcome Report. June 2025. Principles for Peace

programming, enable meaningful monitoring and evaluation, and generate better evidence about what actually works in specific contexts. Short-term project cycles of six to nine months rarely allow organisations to document structural change, as peacebuilding outcomes often emerge through gradual, nonlinear processes. Principles for Peace (2025) highlights that *"finance is a fulcrum for transformation"*, noting that without sustained, risk-sharing and positive peace financing, competition and institutional fragmentation are likely to deepen. Longer-term support, however, makes it possible to observe cycles of changes, delayed effects, and the interaction between interventions and local contexts. A notable example here comes from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which initiated an eight-year peacebuilding support programme (2024-2031)[17], enabling organisations to implement sustained projects and to assess their longer-term outcomes.

2. European leadership

Francesca Grandi, Head of Defence and Security at Transparency International, explained that as Europe reacts to the perceived weakening of the US-backed collective defence arrangement, it risks acting without a coherent strategic fallback. Current defence debates, particularly within NATO and EU Member States, are shaped by crisis-response logic and short-term political pressure. Compressed decision-making timelines, risks creating a sort of strategic amnesia, and sidelining four decades of accumulated experience in peacebuilding, governance, and institutional resilience. She sees this moment instead as an opportunity for deeper European integration and coordination, in which the dominant narrative should shift from rapid, visible capability investments toward long-term structural accountability, oversight, and institutional integrity alongside security spending. Similarly, Sonya Reines-Djivanides (Executive Director of EPLO) explained that the EU's strong focus on deterrence is overshadowing the necessity to focus not only on the short-term perceived threats but also on the longer-term ways in which the EU can be a strong partner and supporter of peace and stability. The European Liaison Office (EPLO) published a statement in October 2021[18] explaining that the European Peace Facility's design failed to incorporate a human-centred approach to security and has rather been used to channel significant amounts of military aid to support Ukraine's defence, which shows a shift away from the EPF's initial purpose of building and preserving peace.

Several experts highlighted Europe's pivotal role, noting that EU member states can frame current challenges either as narrow security threats or within a broader context where security is only one element. Peacebuilding cannot rely on perpetual crisis response alone but requires sustained investment in prevention, acknowledging that conflict prevention extends beyond military measures to include meaningful civil society participation, renewed investment in diplomacy and the integration of expertise from diverse fields. Such an approach enables policymakers to understand contemporary dynamics as part of an interconnected ecosystem and to act through a more holistic and integrated security framework. As Cedric de Conning argues, *"the relationship between military capabilities and deterrence is complex and shaped by a multitude of related political, economic, and strategic factors. Understanding the conditions under which deterrence is more likely to be*

17. https://www.government.nl/documents/decrees/2023/11/09/subsidy-framework-contributing-to-peaceful-and-safe-societies-2024-2031

18. https://eplo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/EPLO_Statement-on-the-European-Peace-Facility.pdf

effective and investing in shaping the conditions that sustain peace require a comprehensive approach to peace and security that combines defence, diplomacy and peacebuilding."

C. Civil-military cooperation

1. Changing a deeply entrenched mindset

The current geopolitical conditions have opened spaces for the military worldview to gain more prominence in the political sphere. In essence, the military views the world through security and defence lenses, where their priority lies in effectiveness and ability to operate in any scenario, even when cooperation is complicated. They perceive threats in terms of military capabilities, training, arms production, human power, technological knowledge, and anticipate deterrence using defence industry data as an indicator of power. Cedric de Coning frames this as the 'defence ecosystem', "that can lock a society into a self-reinforcing loop where everything is justified through a security lens. The risk is that over-prioritising defence can limit our ability to create the society we want, even beyond the mere financing, or underfinancing, of various budget items." A 2026 report from the UN Secretary-General warns that *"over time, the entrenchment of defense-oriented economies fosters networks of political, economic and social influence that are primarily dedicated to maintaining high military spending."*[19] The overexpansion of one worldview at the expense of others threatens the balance needed to build a robust and resilient system that can help to bring about durable peace and security.

Here, our objective was to better understand the nature of the defence architecture and military institution in order to assess whether, and under what conditions, it would be relevant for peacebuilding actors to engage directly with military structures. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that a central issue lies in how military institutions conceptualise the added value of investment in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. According to Lt Gen C.J. Matthijssen, *"military institutions' priority seems to lie in political considerations also as they have limited view on the impact of cuts in development assistance, though they understand collaboration as a tool to mitigate differences"*. He explained that within military institutions, support for civil-military cooperation is often shaped by operational rather than normative considerations. For example, when deployed in a foreign context, armed forces recognise that cooperation with civilian actors can help build trust with local populations, improve situational awareness, and reduce security risks for troops on the ground. This does not necessarily come from a preoccupation with addressing the root causes of conflict, but rather from a pragmatic assessment of what forms of cooperation are feasible and useful for stabilisation and risk mitigation.

Nevertheless, Lt Gen Matthijssen acknowledged that military actors increasingly recognise the importance of conflict prevention and the added value of engaging with civilian expertise, as there is an inherent need for a comprehensive approach in peacebuilding. From this perspective, cooperation can be seen as a means of developing a more holistic and

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19. Iversen, T. O., de Coning, C. H., & Sandvik, K. B. (2026, January 13). *The risks of a war economy mentality*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

grounded understanding of crises, thereby helping to prevent escalation. His emphasis on the idea that "it is better to meet before the crisis" reflects a growing awareness within military institutions that early engagement, dialogue, and coordination can strengthen preventive strategies. This recognition underscores why engagement between peacebuilding actors and military institutions (while being complex) remains both relevant and necessary.

For example, the Dutch evaluation of MINUSMA in Mali[20] shows that military stabilisation without peacebuilding is strategically ineffective. Although Dutch forces significantly improved intelligence and force protection, these gains were not connected to political dialogue, local mediation, or efforts to rebuild state and society relations. As a result, security improvements remained temporary and did not reduce the drivers of conflict. The mission's fragmented structure kept military and peacebuilding actors in separate silos, preventing cooperation between the military and civil society from shaping political and social stability. The example of Mali demonstrates how the sidelining of peacebuilding actors and context-specific, designed conflict prevention tools does not merely limit a mission's success but actively undermines it by allowing violence to come back once military actors and their intervention are withdrawn.

Interestingly, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) published early January 2026 its new development policy in which it sets its priorities and area of focus of its strategy. Entitled "Shaping the future together globally".[21] The report stresses the importance of promoting security over the long term, especially focusing its work on peace and security in the MENA Region, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. In the key points of the reform plan, it is specifically stated that *"Civil society organisations will remain key partners for the BMZ and are to play an even greater role in implementing the overarching goals."* This new strategy showcases the importance of partnership and the relevance of an integrated approach to security to progress toward lasting peace.

2. Concrete examples

Building on this recognition, the key challenge is translating awareness of prevention into institutional change. Existing civil-military initiatives illustrate how engagement with civilian actors can gradually influence military mindsets and practices. For example, Transparency International has worked with NATO, primarily through the NATO Building Integrity Programme, to provide expertise, tools, and training aimed at strengthening governance, transparency, and accountability within the defence and security sectors of member and partner nations.[22]

In the Dutch context, organisations like Care, Cordaid, PAX and WO=MEN have been invited to engage as subject matter experts in NATO exercises and training. Focus of inputs provided have centered around civil military interaction, Women Peace and Security and gender awareness, conflict sensitivity, and civilian protection. Next to this, presentations have also

20. https://www.iob-evaluatie.nl/site/binaries/site-content/collections/documents/2022/09/30/evaluatie-nederlandse-bijdrage-minusma/ENG+Summary+%E2%80%93+A+mission+within+a+mission.pdf
21. https://www.bmz.de/en/ministry/shaping-the-future-together-globally-282836
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23. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/PreventingConflict

delved into the possible role and involvement of NGOs, and differences between developmental and humanitarian civil society organisations.

Another example which highlights how defence policymakers increasingly value the integration of civil society expertise and knowledge into peacebuilding frameworks through the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade in Australia, which launched a formal "Preventing Conflict" inquiry.[23] It underscores a growing recognition within defence institutions that military power alone is insufficient for lasting security. By actively examining how civilian-led development programmes and civil society engagement can contribute to preventing conflict, the inquiry demonstrates a clear commitment to civil-military cooperation. This mindset shift is vital if we are to build sustainable peace rather than simply manage violence.

However, to change a part of the founding ideology of an institution like the military, the initiative cannot only be top-down. Members of this institution must personally understand the relevance of the shift and, more importantly, be drivers of change. For example, Maria Alejandra Zorro (Protection Leader at Fundacion LATIR) and Felipe Tamayo (Advocacy Leader at Fundacion LATIR), both working at Fundación Latir in Colombia, described the development of a pilot project with the Colombian Air Force that aims to introduce socio-emotional skills, such as empathy, communication, self-regulation, and cooperation, to promote new perspectives on peace, care, and coexistence within the armed forces. The initiative seeks to shift the institution's internal understanding of conflict by incorporating tools and approaches from civil society, particularly those rooted in mental health practices and gender-aware conceptions of conflict and strength. Ultimately, the project aims to create space for constructive dialogue on peace and security and to introduce new norms that are often absent from traditional military reasoning and behaviour. They hope that the programme could be expanded through the Ministry of Defence and influence future policies.

CONCLUSION AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The future of peacebuilding requires a fundamental shift in how peace is conceived, prioritised and communicated. As this reflection paper has demonstrated, the growing emphasis on military spending and hard-security responses undermines democratic resilience, enhances the shrinking of civic space and marginalises conflict prevention. While investments in defence capabilities remain necessary, peacebuilding and prevention must be treated as equally essential components for a holistic and integrated understanding of the global security architecture.

In the context of the multiple, overlapping crises confronting contemporary societies, governments must adapt their security strategies accordingly if they want to progress toward sustainable peace. Peacebuilding actors must strengthen their capacity to engage proactively with policymakers by translating their expertise into clear and actionable guidance. Based on the analysis presented, five key areas of focus emerged:

1. **Institutionalise conflict prevention as a strategic investment**
Governments should systematically integrate evidence on the cost-effectiveness of conflict prevention into national and multilateral security decision-making. Demonstrating the long-term economic, political and social returns of preventive action is essential to ensure that peacebuilding informs policy choices rather than remaining a secondary concern.

2. **Reframe peacebuilding as a core component of integrated security policy**
Peacebuilding and prevention must be framed not as an idealistic activity, but as strategic security investments. This requires developing clear and compelling narratives that link peacebuilding to tangible benefits such as strengthened governance, restored public trust, social cohesion and reduced displacement or migration pressures. Without such framing, peacebuilding risks continued marginalisation within security debates dominated by short-term threat perceptions.

3. **Strengthen resilience against information warfare and polarisation**
Countering information warfare should be recognised as a central prevention challenge. Upstream analysis, critical thinking, media literacy, and systemic engagement are vital tools for protecting societies from manipulation, polarisation and democratic erosion. Governing institutions must acknowledge that Western societies are direct targets of deliberate influence strategies designed to weaken internal cohesions, both domestically and within defence alliances. The pivotal role of civil society organisations and think tanks in this context needs to be acknowledged.

4. Protect and expand spaces for dialogue and inclusion

Safeguarding spaces for dialogue domestically, internationally and online must be recognised as a core pillar of security policy. Investment in peacebuilding and prevention is indispensable to sustaining these spaces, rebuilding trust, reinforcing international norms and fostering mutual understanding across sectors and societies. Infrastructures (multilateral, national, local) in which dialogue is possible are among the most effective tools for preventive escalation and strengthening long-term resilience.

5. Reinforce cooperation across all security actors

Achieving durable peace requires structured cooperation between governing institutions, military actors and civil society. Such tripartite engagement enables the anticipation of emerging risks across physical, political, and digital domains and supports more coherent, evidence-based responses to complex crises. Peacebuilding actors' expertise must therefore be embedded within broader security ecosystems rather than operating in parallel or isolation.

Within this framework, peacebuilding is not an abstract aspiration or an empty promise. It constitutes a cornerstone of collective survival. Enabling civil society experts, practitioners and academics to inform decision makers and engage constructively with defence institutions is pivotal for identifying, analysing and addressing the multifaceted nature of contemporary insecurity.

Ultimately, this paper has sought to reflect on the underlying dynamics driving the global rise in military spending. It argues that much of the insecurity this trend seeks to address is actively shaped by authoritarian strategies aimed at weakening democratic systems, norms and values. Peacebuilding is deliberately targeted because it represents a foundational pillar of democratic resilience. Without sustained investment in peacebuilding and conflict management tools the foundations of multilateralism and cooperation are eroded, precisely at a moment when they are most needed to confront the global polycrisis defining our era.

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Fabio Daniele, Intelligence Analyst and General Secretary at Sustainable Cooperation for Peace and Security, Italy.

Valnora Edwin, Director of African women Leader's Network Sierra Leone Chapter, Sierra Leone

Francesca Grandi, Head of Defence and Security at Transparency International

Nic Hailey, Executive Director at International Alert, United Kingdom

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About CSPPS

The <u>Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding</u> (CSPPS) is a global network of civil society organisations supporting peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts in fragile and conflict-affected settings. CSPPS brings together a diverse representation of civil society globally from countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence, and international civil society organisations working on the issues of peacebuilding, statebuilding, conflict prevention and development. CSPPS supports in-country interventions to amplify the voice of civil society in political dialogues and relevant policy processes.

At the global level, CSPPS represents civil society in the <u>International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding</u> (IDPS); a unique strategic tripartite partnership for political dialogue gathering civil society actors, governments from the g7+ group of countries, and donors represented by the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF).
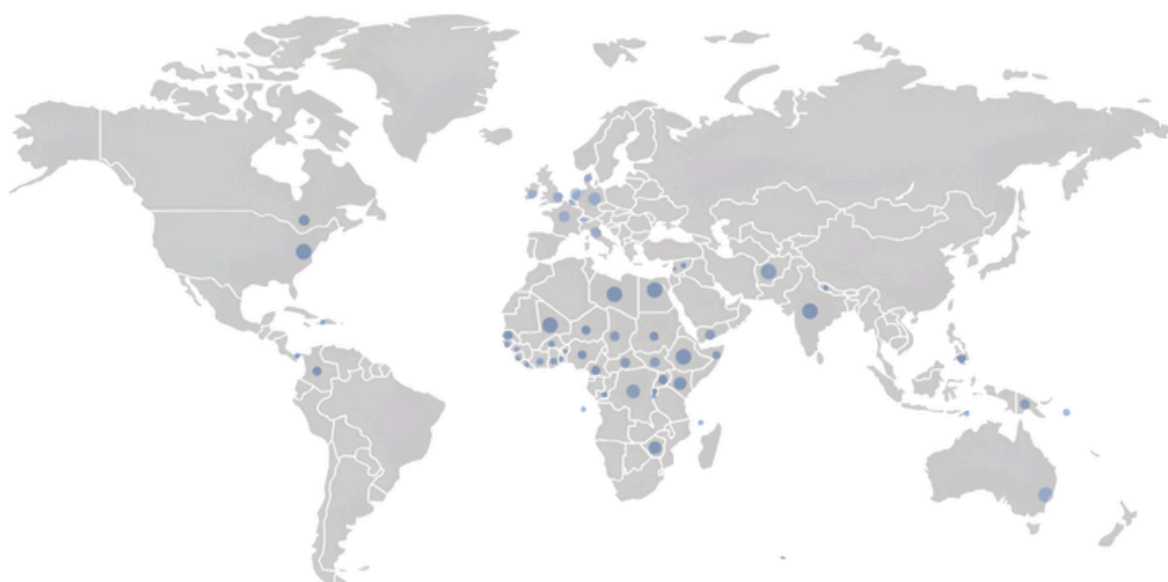
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