eSeminar Summary

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Centre for Security Governance

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ON PEACEBUILDING AND STATEBUILDING: NEW CHALLENGES, SHARP DIVISIONS

PeaceTech: Harnessing Technology to Advance Peacebuilding

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PeaceTech: Harnessing Technology to Advance Peacebuilding

On February 1, 2017, the Centre for Security Governance (CSG), in cooperation with the Balsillie School of International Affairs (BSIA) and Wilfrid Laurier University's (WLU's) Department of Global Studies, hosted the sixth in a series of eight online seminars focusing on "Contemporary Debates on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding."

The eSeminar brought together a group of experts — scholars, researchers and practitioners — to examine issues related to the emerging field of PeaceTech and its potential use and success in the peacebuilding process. With access to mobile phones, cloud computing and the internet expanding rapidly in low- and middle-income states, new avenues of participation, engagement, and accountability are emerging for people to influence processes that impact their society. Peacebuilding is not immune to these changing dynamics. Known as PeaceTech, this emerging field sits at the intersection of technology, data and media. It aims to reduce violent conflict and offer new ways for citizens to engage with peacebuilding processes.

While most of the attention on technology for peacebuilding has focused using social media to improve early warning and response, PeaceTech is a cross-sector, multi-disciplinary field that is radically changing the peacebuilding field through the creation of alternative infrastructures for peace. The new technologies fostered by PeachTech allow users to reach wider audiences and report events, data, and developments more accurately. Digital media offers tools for local peace builders to easily challenge dominant conflict narratives with alternative visions. Networking platforms provide new avenues for positive communication and relationship-building to be fostered between conflict groups, which creates digital trust networks.

As PeaceTech provides innovative tools to counter age-old drivers of conflict, it is important to explore what they mean for broader peacebuilding processes. This eSeminar considered different strategies to employ technology constructively to advance peace, reconciliation, and political stability in conflict-affected and fragile states, highlighting several critical questions surrounding the issue:

- What are some of the challenges that can be expected from this innovative approach to peace advancement?
- How can PeaceTech provide innovative tools to counter age-old drivers of conflict?
- •What, if any, best practices exist in implementing PeaceTech into peacebuilding?

About the CSG

The Centre for Security Governance (CSG) is a non-profit, non-partisan think tank dedicated to the study of security and governance transitions in fragile, failed and conflict-affected states. Based in Canada, the CSG maintains a global, multi-disciplinary network of researchers, practitioners and academics engaged in the international peace and security field.

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- And how do we address the possible misuse or unintended consequences of peacebuilding technology?

Dr. Mark Sedra, the former Executive Director of the CSG, moderated the eSeminar. His introductory remarks highlighted three themes that emerged in the panelists' presentations: how technology can be harnessed and exploited by the peacebuilding community, the strategies that can be employed to identify entry points for action, and the challenges that can be expected from this innovative approach to peace advancement. The potential challenges in harnessing technology to advance peacebuilding in conflict-affected countries were addressed by each of the panelists using a variety of case studies and perspectives from their own experiences.

Giselle Lopez, senior specialist at the PeaceTech Lab, emphasized how peacebuilding efforts using technology, media, and data need to focus on engagement at the local level. Lopez discussed the innovative ways in which the PeaceTech Lab has helped build skills and capacity for "local tech sources" to enable new technologies to support their efforts.

Walter Dorn, professor of Defence Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada and the Canadian Forces College, discussed peacekeeping technology in conflict zones and how the United Nations can serve as an enabler of tech-

nology in the field.

Nada Basir, strategy professor at the Conrad Business, Entrepreneurship and Technology Centre at the University of Waterloo, underlined the role of technology in bridging communities and civil society support networks in the context of the recent Libyan civil war.

Anwar Abas, Director of Outreach and Partnerships for SalamaTech at the SecDev Foundation, discussed the digital dependency of civil society groups and non-violent actors in the Syrian conflict. Abas highlighted the pervasiveness of digital risk for civil society actors and the critical role SalamTech plays in boosting their digital security capacities.

Summary of Presentations

Speaker 1 – Giselle Lopez

Giselle Lopez's presentation centered on the PeaceTech Lab's peacebuilding efforts in technology, media, and data. In countries effected by violent conflict, innovative approaches to peacebuilding must focus on engagement at the local level and be tailored to the specific issue or area. Lopez first highlighted the role of PeaceTech in enabling technologies through "PeaceTech Exchanges" which brings together civil society groups and local technologists to help build capacity and incorporate low-cost technologies into the work of civil society

groups. The exchanges enable local leaders in peacebuilding organizations to leverage new technologies in their day-to-day work. The workshops can include training sessions on digital story-telling, mapping, mobile data collection, as well as digital security tools. As an example, in one of these PeachTech Exchanges, Elsa Marie De'Silva developed "Safe City," a mapping tool that allows women to mark exact geographical locations of places they had experienced harassment or any type of gender-based violence.

Beyond the role of incorporating low-cost technologies into the work of civil society groups, Lopez also discussed the work of "Peace Media Programs" which focus on engaging youth in peacebuilding through an "entertainment model." The programs are geared towards providing space for young people to discuss issues related to the drivers of conflict. For example, the Peace Media Program in South Sudan has helped propel the series Sawa Shabab (together youth) as a platform to discuss gender relations using its characters and plot lines. The show has empowered collaborations with local media organizations including "Free Voice" to broadcast the show throughout the country.

On the data side, Lopez also discussed PeaceTech's "Open Situation Room Exchange" as a way to make data more accessible to the peacebuilding community. The Open Situation Room Exchange is a public website designed to provide open-source early warning capabilities; it combines visualizations from a range of real time and structured data sources including news, social media, and event reports on violence and protests to provide a baseline view of conflict and instability.

As new technologies continue to advance, opportunities to leverage technology in the peacebuilding field will continue to grow. However, Lopez argued that technology has not replaced or transformed underlying practices and principles of peacebuilding, nor should it. Rather, technology has provided new means to reach broader audiences, to collect information, and to change knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors more quickly, easily, and economically than ever before.

Speaker 2 – Walter Dorn

Walter Dorn opened his presentation on peacekeeping technology with a quote from Albert Einstein who said, "Concern for man himself and his fate (humanity and its fate) should be the chief interest of all technical endeavors. Never forget this in the midst of your diagrams and equations." While UN peace operations are certainly imperfect, they are nevertheless one of the greatest expressions of humankind's concern for humanity. Dorn went on to highlight the mandates that are given to peacekeeping operations which include monitoring cease-fires, peace agreements, protected areas and persons (POC), elections, human rights, sanctions, and armed groups and spoilers.

The proliferation of monitoring technologies has increased the range and accuracy of observation in peacekeeping missions. In this regard, Dorn presented a diagram on the range of monitoring instruments that could be deployed in peace operations, including satellite reconnaissance and AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) carriers, helicopters equipped with stabilized infrared cameras to Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), artillery shell locators, and ground surveillance radars that detect movement of troops, personnel, and hidden weapons caches. In addition, the growth of "non-lethal technologies" (i.e. Taser, pepper spray, rubber bullets) has provided peacekeepers a range of applicational force in monitoring missions that are not as dangerous.

While there is no technological quick-fix, technology can be of immense value in monitoring, preventing and mitigating conflict. Technical monitoring can also increase the safety and security of peacekeepers, as well as the effectiveness of the mission. Dorn emphasized the capability of the UN to advance modern monitoring technology; however, there is significant room for improvement. In this regard, Dorn was part of an expert panel on technology and innovation in UN peacekeeping which culminated into the "Performance Peacekeeping" report. The report set out practical recommendations which are now an integral facet of the UN's implementation strategy to develop capacity building in UN peacekeeping missions.

Speaker 3 – Nada Basir

Nada Basir drew on the Libyan context to highlight how innovation and technology served as catalysts in bridging communities and civil society support networks during the conflict. She argued that the revolution triggered a burgeoning civil society space for non-violent organizations and actors to set up quasi-organizations and media channels to coordinate relief and governance. Before the revolution, civil society space in Libya was severely restricted. Thus, leveraging existing technology in unique ways became a means with which non-violent actors were able to share and disseminate knowledge and information in an effort to bridge a traditionally mosaic civil society.

While there was a civil society vacuum inside Libya, Basir argued that information learning was being transferred and disseminated through social media. Libya Outreach, a Facebook group of over 2000 people from Libya and abroad, became incredibly successful at mobilizing and taking action. One of the group's functions called "The Situation Report Group," generated daily situational reports on the ground monitoring military targets, weapons depots, and regime and militia movements. With thousands still missing and up to 450,000 now internally displaced, Libya is still in the midst of a humanitarian disaster. While the international community tries to build mechanisms to instill the building blocks of civil society, it is important to leverage local ownership to legitimize the process. Basir emphasized that

we cannot see peace technology from just a technology perspective; there is a social aspect that is much more important in the process of building and introducing it.

Speaker 4 – Anwar Abas

Anwar Abas began his presentation by providing a background on the struggles faced by Syrian civil society before the war broke out in March 2011. Indeed, the Assad regime had maintained a tight grip on public space through its de-facto mukhabarat state and control of professional syndicates, NGOs, and media censorship. While there was a large degree of oppression towards dissident voices and civil society groups, cyber space became an alternative space to debate public issues, politics, and civil society. However, the regime developed its surveillance, monitoring, and information war capabilities in response.

Abas explained that as the Arab Spring arrived in Syria in March 2011, activists started to use the internet and social media to organize and coordinate their activities, mobilize the public, share stories, report news, and document human rights violations. However, the scene in Syria has changed dramatically since 2011. Abas highlighted that since the end of 2012, the prolonged onslaught completely deteriorated infrastructure and services, fragmented communities along confessional lines, and has led to the rise of militant actors and radical groups. Abas then went on to elaborate three thematic

areas that are relevant to the work of SalamaTech: the proliferation of civil actors, growing digital dependency, and the pervasiveness of digital risk. Abas argued that the war has increased the number of civil society groups and nonviolent actors operating inside Syria (citing a 2016 study carried out by "Citizens for Syria" which had mapped over 850 civil society groups working inside the country). The dependence on technology has also increased over the course of the conflict. Digital space has become a means to not only share news and stories, but it has also become essential to people's survival. Abas underscored the high value technology has in conflict affected states: the instant dissemination and reporting of information lets people know where aid is going to be delivered, where the next checkpoint is, and it allows individuals to archive war crimes and keep in touch with family and community life.

As the destructive civil war and corresponding information war in Syria has raged, the pervasiveness of digital risk is greater now as multiple actors (regime, extremist groups, non-state actors, and other political groups) compete in cyberspace. Abas emphasized the critical role at SalamaTech in helping civilian activists enhance their digital security online by providing circulation of digital alerts, capacity building in digital security and digital hygiene, and learning and awareness raising. Abas concluded that digital security should be mainstreamed into development and peacebuilding programmes. Ensuring Syrian civil society's survival in the war is es-

sential to peacebuilding in the transition phase; "their survival online is very much linked to their survival offline."

Discussion Period and Key Themes

Following the presentations, the panelists engaged in a lively discussion on harnessing technology to advance peacebuilding. Three overarching themes framed the Q&A period: building and scaling up PeaceTech initiatives, addressing infrastructural dilemmas to PeaceTech advancements, and safeguards to prevent the misuse or abuse of PeaceTech. This section provides a summary of the main elements and takeaways from this discussion, highlighting key questions and answers from the audience and the panelists.

Theme 1 – Building and Scaling up PeaceTech Initiatives

The issue of building and scaling up PeaceTech projects was raised by several members of the audience in the discussion period. Beyond the initial implementation phase, how can we ensure that promising PeaceTech initiatives do not fade away after their launch? The panelists were asked to give specific recommendations on what measures can be applied to ensure the growth and success of PeaceTech innovations. All panelists acknowledged that the potential for growth and scalability should be a funda-

mental consideration for all PeaceTech initiatives. Giselle Lopez drew on the approach at "PeaceTech Exchanges" where her organization serves as a critical platform to connect local tech sources with sponsors to support the project going forward. Lopez also acknowledged the seed-funding approach as a useful mechanism to incentivize the growth and follow through of PeaceTech initiatives.

Nada Basir linked scalability of PeaceTech projects to the unique context where they are implemented. She argued that peacebuilding technologies that have worked elsewhere must still be adapted to other contexts. This requires bringing in local capacities from the start to maximize scalability and adoption potential. Walter Dorn commented on the scalability question in PeaceTech projects from a peacekeeping perspective. In this regard, he reinforced the role of the UN as a catalyst in mainstreaming technological innovations in peace operations. Through standardized equipment manuals and procurement processes, Dorn argued that the UN has the potential to launch hopeful PeaceTech initiatives.

Anwar Abas rounded out the topic of scalability in PeaceTech through his own experience in mainstreaming digital security into peacebuilding. Abas noted that active advocacy and participation in workshops and social media platforms was key in educating beneficiaries that digital security is not only relevant to their work, but also essential to their safety. Abas also

talked about the necessity of scaling PeaceTech intiatives from the ground-up. For example, SalamaTech's network "Freedom Champion" employs local people in Syria to promote digital security within their own community and social networks; Abas argued that "Freedom Champion" has been important in scaling the importance of digital security for civil society organizations and non-violent actors in Syria.

Theme 2 – Addressing Infrastructural Dilemmas to PeaceTech Advancement

The panelists were then asked how PeaceTech initiatives could be leveraged in extreme contexts where infrastructural barriers might limit their advancement. This led to a discussion on the dilemmas of advancing PeaceTech in settings where the community may be tech-illiterate or in despotic contexts where the internet is tightly regulated. In addition, the notion that internet dependency is critical to the advancement of PeaceTech was sharply critiqued by the panelists.

Lopez responded to the internet dependency perception by first reiterating that there is always the issue of "access" and "security" in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. She highlighted that through PeaceTech Lab, a number of the "enabling technologies" they help support do not require internet access. Mobile data collection tools using SMS or Interactive Voice Response (IVR) allow for rapid information diffusion without any internet access. Lopez also

brought up the utility of Kobo Toolbox during PeaceTech Lab's fieldwork in Iraq where their research team managed to collect and store information in locations with no internet access. Nada Basir echoed that peace technology and innovation can happen in a variety of ways without the existence of strong infrastructure and internet connection. Going back to her experience in Libya, Basir argued that internet penetration in society was only at six percent before the revolution. The process of the revolution had really stimulated knowledge diffusion in technology. In this regard, she reiterated that societies can become tech-literate very quickly.

Anwar Abas expressed the challenges of working in a context where the internet is heavily controlled by the authorities and where by the regime has its own pervasive capacity to surveil and monitor "dissent." Abas cautioned, "When you use a tool, you need to understand this tool, the good sides and the risks associated with it." He went on to underline the mandate at SalamTech which is to educate civil society actors on how to choose the right networks and platforms that will minimize the risk of being exposed.

Trend 3 – Safeguards to Prevent the Misuse or Abuse of PeaceTech

The panelists were asked to give examples on how safeguards can be instilled to prevent PeaceTech innovations from being misused or abused by various actors in the peacebuilding

process.

Walter Dorn provided an explicit example of how peacekeeping technology can go wrong. He highlighted an incident in Bosnia where citizens were relaying unencrypted communication of Serbian mortar fire in the area; unfortunately, the Serbian mortar team intercepted the communication (and the location of observers), resulting in massive amounts of carnage. In this regard, Dorn stressed that peacekeeping technology in signals intelligence (SIGINT) needs to be encrypted. "When you start playing the technological game, you want to be able to win that game." This means being on top of the technologies and trying to eliminate the risks of it being misused.

Giselle Lopez recognized the danger of data and information collection in areas where there is violent conflict. How do you ensure that the information being collected and shared is not going to put anybody at increased risk? She reiterated that PeaceTech Lab's Information for Exchange Program uses all open source data that's already available online. In addition, the Armed Conflict and Events Location Database (structured data sets from the UN) enables people to access and interact with the public data in their own work. Certainly, a focal consideration for any tool that leverages data collection, especially in areas of violent conflict, is preventing the exposure of any information that may put people at increased or undue risk. Lopez insured that PeaceTech Lab takes every

concerted effort to prevent any handles that could be traced back to specific individuals or groups.

Conclusion

This eSeminar highlighted some of the benefits and challenges in harnessing technology to advance peacebuilding. While the panelists addressed several key recommendations, including current practices and challenges, additional research is required to further explore this intersection of technology, data and media to reduce violent conflict. Bringing in a variety of perspectives and case studies, the panelists shared similar views on four key areas of action to advance PeaceTech in peacebuilding processes: incorporating local society into the process of PeaceTech innovation to confront, and counter, age-old drivers of conflict; addressing potential misuse or unintended consequences of peacebuilding technology to instill effective safeguards; calibrating PeaceTech initiatives to work around infrastructural dilemmas; and enhancing digital security for civil society groups and non-violent actors operating in fragile and conflict-affected areas. As new technologies continue to advance, opportunities to leverage technology in the international peace and security field will continue to grow. It is, thus, an important consideration for peacebuilders to explore how technologies can be employed constructively to advance peace, reconciliation, and political stability.

Notes

[1] For more information on the Safe City initiative, see http://safecity.in/

[2] To learn more about Sawa Shabab, see https://www.usip.org/programs/sawa-shabab-peacebuilding-radio-drama-youth-south-sudan

[3] W. Dorn (2011). Keeping Watch: Monitoring, Technology and Innovation in UN Peace Operations. Available at: https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:2526/ebrary9789280811988.pdf

[4] While technology and social media could have been essential carriers and facilitators of revolutionary mobilization and civil-society space, it is important to situate the role of social media in revolutionary mobilization and civil-society with great care next to a host of other mechanisms within complex social processes inherent to mass mobilization and contentious politics; Cf. E. Selbin (2010). Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story. London: Zed Books.

[5] See UNHCR (2017), "Libya Factsheet: April 2017," Available at: http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Libya%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20April%202017.pdf

[6] See Citizens for Syria (2016), "Mapping the Syrian civil Society actors: Phase one," Available at: https://citizensforsyria.org/OrgLiterature/CfS-mapping-phase1-EN.pdf

About the Presenters

Dr. Mark Sedra is the executive director of the Centre for Security Governance and the moderator of the eSeminar series. Prior to joining the Centre for Security Governance, he was a senior fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and the leader of CIGI's Security Sector Governance project.

Giselle Lopez is a Senior Specialist at the PeaceTech Lab. Giselle's work with PeaceTech focuses on providing support for the Lab's Open Situation Room Exchange, a program designed to make data more accessible to the peacebuilding community.

Dr. Walter Dorn is Professor of Defence Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada and the Canadian Forces College. He specializes in arms control, peace operations, just war theory, international criminal law, international verification and enforcement, and the United Nations.

Dr. Nada Basir is a strategy professor at the Conrad Business, Entrepreneurship and Technology Centre at the University of Waterloo. She holds a PhD in Strategic Management, and an M.Sc and B.Sc in Molecular Biotechnology.

Anwar Abas is the Director of Outreach and Partnerships for SalamaTech at the SecDev Foundation. Working for 12 years in the Syrian development sector, Anwar's focus has been on empowering marginalized people.

Event Organizers

The Centre for Security Governance (CSG) is a non-profit, non-partisan think tank dedicated to the study of security and governance transitions in fragile, failed and conflict-affected states.

The Balsillie School of International Affairs (BSIA) is an institute for advanced research, education, and outreach in the fields of global governance and international public policy. Founded in 2007 by philanthropist Jim Balsillie, BSIA is an equal collaboration among the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), the University of Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier University.

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