DE-CODED CONFLICT – TECH-SUPPORTED PEACE

THE PEACETECH APPROACH OF THE AUSTRIAN CENTRE ON PEACE AT SCHLAINING

Reality Check

The exponential growth of information technologies, the availability of an abundance of data caused by the spread of mobile networks, the everyday use of mobile devices and social media since the digital revolution in the late 20th century affected the world we live in profoundly. Among others, substantial changes have been reflected in the way we work, discuss politics, what infrastructure we use or how we consume. Even though state-of-the-art technologies are playing an ever-increasing role in the nature and dynamics of violent conflicts, and sectors such as development cooperation and humanitarian aid have managed to adapt their responses accordingly, the use of cutting edge technology has only played a subordinate role in the field of conflict management and resolution, mediation, peacebuilding and peace operations.

Definition

Under the label PeaceTech, social media, geographic information systems (GIS), data analytics, Virtual Reality (VR) frameworks and other digital technologies can provide analytical support both to better understand and monitor conflicts and for situational awareness, forecasting or nowcasting. Additionally, they can create innovation in capacity building and training as well as scale peacebuilding efforts. In that sense, PeaceTech is a multi-dimensional term. It either describes topics at the technology-conflict-peace interface or – more practically – a set of digital and virtual tools that can be applied in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Albeit to a modest degree, PeaceTech approaches are already applied throughout the conflict and peace nexus for (i) sentiment analysis (e.g. for public policy-making), (ii) network analysis (e.g. for conflict resolution), (iii) for satellite imagery and in Unmanned Aerial Vehicle UAVs (e.g. for monitoring and documenting human rights crimes) or as (iv) storytelling and advocacy tools (in social media, blogs, podcasts, online forums).

ASPR Approach: Creating impact

As an independent, non-profit and non-partisan organisation, our main fields of work are peace and conflict research, capacity building (Peace Education and the training of civilian experts for peacebuilding and conflict transformation) as well as conflict transformation (engaging in dialogue, supporting peace mediation processes, resolving and transforming conflicts in crisis regions).

In the context of our **research agenda**, the PeaceTech topic has already been a major pillar for some time. As part of the "PeaceTech" initiative of the “The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform – PeaceRep” (as well as its predecessor project) we[1] have been responding to a changing conflict resolution landscape by looking at ways to facilitate peace-building processes aimed at ending violent conflict through crafting adequate digital tools and platforms. This approach to digital transformation

[1] As part of a seven-year research consortium led by the University of Edinburgh Law School, funded by UK Aid from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK.

of peace and conflict research partly also builds on the PA-X Peace Agreement Database which provides a comprehensive dataset of peace agreements from 1990 to mid-2021, capable of underpinning both quantitative and qualitative research.

We have also started integrating PeaceTech into our other working areas as well – among others by accelerating efforts as part of our **capacity development** work. In this context, we have not only identified the potential of digital technologies such as mixed or virtual reality training frameworks, online trainings, webinars, and digital distance learning solutions but also taken the first steps to integrate them comprehensively into our trainings. Concretely, we[2] are currently working on opening innovative avenues in form of a mixed reality training framework for the training of skills for civilian experts in crisis situations (KIRAS SkillDrill Project). Such a framework will allow us to use VR tools on-demand and remotely in all our future trainings.

PeaceTech, however, can not only be a major innovation driver in research and capacity building, it is also highly relevant in our **conflict transformation** work. This is especially urgent since research has shown a severe lack of technology-conflict-peace interfaces (such as dynamic dashboards of conflict data), geo-referenced and dynamically visualised peace and conflict data (such as interactive maps) that allow predicting various types of conflicts before they arise. In practice this means for example, that there is a significant need for georeferenced simulation of the developments on the ground, based on various sources such as Earth Observation (EO) data or Open-Source Intelligence (OS-INT).

It is against this background that we have initiated talks with the OSCE/CPC who has shown strong interest in a future partnership to scale up their Early Warning efforts. We thus started developing an Early Warning tool that dynamically visualises conflicts before they arise by using algorithms and geospatial data. These first steps allow us to develop PeaceTech based approaches as a core competence to offer integrated solutions to prevent conflicts before they become violent and contribute to sustainable development.

In terms of innovating our conflict transformation program, however, predicting conflicts and recognising escalations in time is only one side of the coin. Beyond that it is just as important to react when violent conflict already erupted. In other words, it is essential to close the gap between the possibilities that PeaceTech offers and the need for contemporary and innovative answers to end (or for that matter avoid) violent conflict. It is only then that PeaceTech creates an added value and scales up the impact of practical peace and conflict work on the ground. In the context of our conflict transformation work this could mean to use PeaceTech to fine-tune conflict resolution approaches or draw from an extended toolbox to speed up the application of peacebuilding efforts.

[2] In a consortium with AIT, BMEIA, BMI, BMLV, Johanniter, ÖRK and Mindconsole.