

ALLIANCES FOR PEACE

AUSTRIAN FORUM FOR PEACE 2024: TOWARDS A CLIMATE OF PEACE



AUSTRIAN FORUM FOR PEACE 2024

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Alliances for Peace

Austrian Forum for Peace 2024: Towards a Climate of Peace

In 2024, we have been confronted with the highest intensity of armed conflict since the Second World War. Renewed rivalry between major powers and the decreasing credibility of the so-called liberal world order as well as the ongoing loss of livelihoods due to the climate crisis and the effects of often uncontrolled technological change have had a dramatic impact on security and stability across the world.

No time for rivalry in the field of peace - The extended period of Western hegemony in the international system has been replaced by a fragmented world order, with more and more actors entering the stage and challenging the international system shaped by Euro-Atlantic powers. One significant consequence of this increasing rivalry is a paralysis of the conflict resolution instruments held by international organizations. At the same time, emerging powers are playing an increasing role in the making of war and peace, as they not only contribute to the growing rivalry between great powers but also offer their services in the peaceful resolution of conflicts. In light of the massive challenges facing us, there is no time for rivalry in the field of peace.

The climate crisis and conflict, challenge, and opportunity - As the severity of the climate and environmental crisis escalates, new challenges for peace and security are emerging. Extreme weather, natural disasters, and resource depletion not only exacerbate existing threats but also give rise to conflicts centered on narratives about the climate crisis and ways to mitigate its effects. Of the 25 countries hit hardest by the climate crisis, most are currently facing armed conflict. Our research and practical work on the ground show ever more clearly that this dynamic represents both an additional challenge for countries facing conflict as well as an opportunity. On the one hand, conflict-affected countries are the least equipped to deal with the effects of the climate crisis; on the other hand, this dynamic can be an entry point to build trust between conflicted parties, as the climate crisis affects everyone. If this is approached in a targeted manner using methods drawn from environmental peacebuilding, this trust can be turned into cooperation, and this cooperation can subsequently contribute to broader conflict resolution. An increasing part of the work of the Austrian Centre for Peace is defined by this approach.

International peace experts met for the second time in Stadtschlaining on July 1-4, 2024, at the Austrian Forum for Peace (AFP) - The AFP was established in 2023 to find new and emerging approaches to conflict work and peacebuilding as well as to contribute to sustainable peace worldwide. In 2024, more than 300 participants from 40 countries and 5 continents attended AFP panel discussions and targeted workshops, which benefitted from the diversity and scope of experiences, approaches, and perspectives of experts from the fields of peace and conflict studies, practical conflict resolution, policymaking, and diplomacy. As one AFP participants put it, the exchange between so many diverging perspectives “allows us to understand each other a little bit better than yesterday.”

Emergence of a Fragmented World Order

A shift in the world order is in the making. A growing number of states are seeking to expand their influence regionally or globally, and they are increasingly willing and able to extend their reach through the use of military power. As a result, there is a growing perception that it is not the world order but rather the Euro-Atlantic peace and security architecture that is growing paralysed.

It is not yet clear what the shape of such a fragmented system would be. Descriptions of the emerging system range from pluri-polar to multi-order or multipower. What seems certain is that the double standards exhibited by the Global West in exerting power or applying international law have sped up this process, undermining the credibility of the international legal and political order and jeopardizing readiness for cooperation and consensus. Due to a feeling of neglect of their own security interests, there is little appetite in most of the world – from Africa to Asia – to accommodate European or US security concerns, such as in relation to the Russian war against Ukraine, the Israel-Palestine war, or issues related to migration.

While the evolution of the international system is desired by many emerging powers, some significant states, such as China or India, seem to be aiming for gradual rather than radical changes, which would ensure sufficient stability in order not to harm their own interests. While getting increasingly involved in international affairs, these states are also looking to strike a balance between their own interests and fundamental principles of international law. As one expert at the AFP stated: “Our anger at the system should not lead us to legitimize injustice”.

- **Apply international law every time and everywhere in order to restore the legitimacy of fundamental legal principles and the international system built around it.**
- **Accept that emerging actors are increasingly important stakeholders in the world system who also seek to benefit from its existence.**
- **Opt for an engaging and collaborative approach towards emerging actors instead of a protective stance towards the hegemonic world order of the Global West.**

Global Partnerships in Mediation

Alongside the changing world order, approaches to international mediation appear to be in transition as well. A growing number of countries are looking to increase their profile in international mediation out of a feeling that states with an expanding international influence can and should play a role in conflict resolution. At the same time, as in many other fields, global trust in the classic Western approach to mediation is decreasing. The so-called “liberal peacebuilding” approach – a transformative method based on norms such as human rights and democracy – appears to be fading due to allegations of double standards. As one AFP participant from Africa put it: “Liberal peacebuilding might be dying, but not everyone is sad. It simply hasn’t worked for us in the region.”

Increasingly, there is a turn towards a more transactional approach to mediation, whereby deals are struck based on (mostly) economic interests. A regrettable side of this is development is that outright military victory or even ethnic cleansing seem to be becoming preferred options to end conflicts. Consequently, vulnerable states are increasingly concluding that it is necessary to prepare for war in order to win the peace. Liberal peacebuilding may thus have simply been an “optimistic inter-regnum,” as one AFP participant described it, with the world gradually returning to the ways in which conflict resolution was always done before.

However, another way to look at this phase of transition is to seek out new opportunities for global partnerships between mediation actors from different parts of the world in order to combine elements of transformative and transactional approaches to mediation. In this sense, trust-building must occur between peacebuilders in order to overcome mutual distrust of reciprocal intentions and learn from each other. Two recent positive examples of the transformative approach leading to sustainable peace comes from Colombia and Liberia. One learning in the Colombian case is the value of a strong participative element in the peace process, whereas in the Liberian case, success was contingent on the involvement of traditional leaders.

- **Double down on peace work and re-imagine liberal peacebuilding with a critical perspective.**
- **Conduct more research into the failings and shortcomings of the liberal peace paradigm.**
- **Understand and work with one another’s approaches. Focus on mutual learning and complementarity.**
- **Conduct trust-building between peacebuilders in different parts of the world and from different approaches.**
- **Work with traditional leadership, including tribal and religious figures.**
- **Focus on the need for new peace leadership in times of chaos, reclaiming key values such as humility and empathy.**

Redefining the Role of Multilevel Stakeholders in West African Peace Processes

States like Russia, China, and Türkiye are increasingly shaping developments in West Africa. None of these actors are new in the region, with some involved decades, if not centuries, before European colonialism. However, the Western approach based on conditional aid while applying moral double standards has led to a significant increase in the influence of these states.

As this trend continues to evolve, there is a growing awareness that non-Western powers may also just be pursuing their own interests – which may not align with those of West African

states. For example, Russian security assistance has led to a proliferation of weapons in West Africa, which has severely affected the security situation. Thus, it follows that African countries should set their own interests and goals. Similarly, African states need to be integrated into global security structures, such as the G7 and/or the UN Security Council.

Meanwhile, the security situation in the region is worsening, and it appears difficult to establish whether increasing terrorist activities, organised crime, and/or intercommunal conflicts are predominantly responsible for the current situation. What is certain is that violent extremist groups now control large swaths of land across several countries in the region. The worsening situation has also caused a decrease in investments by international actors.

AFP participants from West African countries agreed that political corruption is likely the biggest challenge to democracy in West Africa. However, democracy can take different forms and shapes. There was broad consensus that there are as many forms of democracy as there are countries with a democratic system in place, and these countries seek equal partnerships.

- **International actors:**

Establish and maintain open communication with all actors.

Avoid duplication of efforts between different actors working in the same region.

Seek tailor-made approaches based on local contexts and needs analysis.

- **African states and partners:**

Identify, focus on, and support non-violent local traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

Work on holistic solutions that consider political, military, economic, and social dimensions.

Support peace and security strategies that are grounded in the social realities of local communities.

Build regional and international cooperation to tackle transnational organised crime and terrorism in the region.

Ways Out of the War in Ukraine

The Russian war against Ukraine is now in its third year. The repercussions of this war have plunged Europe into a period of great uncertainty and have had significant impacts on global well-being. Moreover, the war of aggression has undermined the international order and has called into question the ability of traditional actors to mediate and resolve conflicts.

Experts agree that the time for peace negotiations is not yet ripe and that the war is developing into a war of attrition. This means that the time for peace negotiations will only come when both parties have more to lose than to gain on the battlefield. However, this is also a war over the liberal world order itself, and it has the potential to escalate into a third world war. Thus, military support for Ukraine from Western countries is crucial to enable Ukraine to negotiate a just, sustainable, and permanent peace. Rather than a ceasefire without negotiations, parallel diplomatic efforts are needed. These efforts must be driven by many actors and states, which could include China, the US, Saudi Arabia, and/or Türkiye.

- **Consider which actors are best suited to mediate. European states are politically, economically and militarily implicated in the war and thus may not be in a position to offer any meaningful mediation.**
- **Support the role of civil society. Dialogue led by civil society actors is best suited to explore out-of-the-box ideas and unblock certain dimensions of the conflict.**
- **Continue parallel military and diplomatic efforts to support Ukraine without applying double standards.**
- **Create a broad alliance. An ad-hoc coalition of a few states could initiate a peace process that later turns into a multilateral process.**
- **Involve China and other actors with influence over Russia in peace efforts.**
- **Commit to longterm efforts for a peace process based on international humanitarian law and the UN Charter.**
- **Create strong and sustainable security guarantees for Ukraine and the continuation of negotiations on EU integration and NATO partnership.**
- **Resume serious discussions on arms control and nuclear disarmament to curb the potential for escalation.**

Putting the Climate, Peace, and Security Nexus into Practice

Our planet has never been this hot.

As the severity of the climate and environmental crisis escalates, new challenges for peace and security are emerging. Extreme weather, natural disasters, and the depletion of resources are not only exacerbating existing threats but also giving rise to conflicts centered around narratives about the climate crisis and pathways to mitigate its effects. Climate change thus presents a clear conflict risk. At the same time, conflicts intensify the climate crisis – either by the destruction of the environment during war or the inability of countries at conflict to concentrate on climate change mitigation policies. As global warming progresses, it will be

crucial to strengthen resilience, especially in conflict-affected countries. Due to their vulnerable positions in conflict-affected countries, women are especially impacted by the additional stress of climate change.

In response to these pressing realities, the nexus between climate, the environment, peace, and security has garnered increased attention in international frameworks and policies.

Indeed, this nexus is receiving increasing attention in international organizations, such as the United Nations, and has been mentioned explicitly during the latest COP conference. Operationally, this awareness is increasingly reflected in mission mandates and capacity development in missions and headquarters. Regional organizations, such as the African Union or IGAD, are following suit. Approaches in environmental peacebuilding, which aims to integrate climate and environment-related issues into peacebuilding efforts, has meanwhile delivered successes on a small scale – large breakthroughs are, however, still missing.

In other regions, such as the Middle East, frameworks remain fragmented. The Middle East is one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world. Temperature rises over 50 degrees have become more frequent, and water scarcity is a major problem. Simultaneously, extreme weather challenges, such as flooding, cyclones, or sandstorms are increasing sharply. In addition, there is a long history of tensions over water sources, which is only intensifying. Temperature changes might be serious, but even more important is the related impact on water resources. As water scarcity worsens, states upstream may withhold or reduce water resources to downstream states. Joint authorities charged with managing water flows largely do not include all riverain states. Water scarcity is therefore a difficult issue to handle, as mechanisms to manage disputes are often missing. Technological solutions to address water scarcity do currently exist. However, the preferred approach – the desalination of sea water – has severe side-effects, including an enormous energy consumption and negative impacts on the natural habitat of the sea, which threatens vital fishery industries. Technologies that are truly sustainable must therefore still be developed, but there is a concern that such solutions are developing too slowly.

In the Sahel region, a fast-growing and young population – with 64% of the population below the age of 25 – and ongoing patterns of violence are compounded by resource scarcity that is intensified by climate change. In particular, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso are climate change hot spots that find themselves caught in a complex ecosystem of violence. In Mali, for example, cattle rustling has become a major catalyst for climate-induced conflict. Historically, cattle rustling grew and became embedded in some communities for various reasons, sometimes even as a natural redistribution of wealth. However, this practice has increasingly become a way for non-state armed groups to self-finance or simply to survive during droughts, which are growing more and more intense due to climate change.

Data for Environmental Peacebuilding

Collecting massive amounts of data has grown increasingly critical in order to establish factual bases for the crafting of effective responses to the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, including through peacebuilding measures. Faced with climate change, conflict, and a rising digital divide, effective measures that include local communities are crucial to foster environmental peacebuilding. By harnessing diverse skills and promoting collaboration between academia, the third sector, and government, a comprehensive approach to addressing these challenges can be established. At the same time, the development of digital literacy and technical skills in communities affected by the nexus of climate change and conflict is of crucial importance. Local communities can be empowered to actively participate in environmental peacebuilding efforts through training programmes that focus on the use of digital tools for environmental monitoring, data collection, and analysis. One example is by applying monitoring systems that track the usage and effectiveness of related digital tools, which would increase the potential of relevant technologies. The continuous improvement and adaptation of such tools can be achieved through feedback loops, whereby users report back on their experiences. The transparent delivery of this data is key, as one expert mentioned during the AFP: “Clear identification of data sources is essential for credibility.”

Another strategy would be to contribute to bridging the digital divide. In conflict zones and fragile contexts, it is crucial to seek out low-tech solutions, such as SMS-based reporting systems, community radio, or offline data gathering tools, in order to enable engagement in environmental peacebuilding without depending on advanced high-tech infrastructure.

Moreover, consideration must be given to the environmental sustainability of technology practices themselves, including issues such as recycling programs for e-waste or using renewable energy sources to reduce the environmental footprint. Policy engagement through data-driven advocacy can ensure that the promotion of digital tools for peacebuilding is in balance with environmental sustainability. Reporting on the environmental impact of technology and proposing regulations to minimise this can help influence ethical decision-making.

Generally, others should be inspired and motivated by narratives that highlight real-life success stories of communities using digital tools for environmental peacebuilding. The tangible benefits and positive changes brought about by digital solutions should be highlighted in these stories. These can resonate with local cultures and values, build trust, and eventually contribute to peacebuilding. By integrating these strategies, we can build resilient communities equipped with the skills and tools needed for effective environmental peacebuilding. Collaboration between academia, the third sector, and government can create a robust framework that not only addresses immediate challenges but also paves the way for sustainable, long-term peace and environmental stewardship. The necessity of data-driven peacebuilding initiatives aligns with the ACP’s focus on innovative solutions in peace processes as well as the ACP’s approach to leveraging technology for conflict prevention and resolution.

- **Make data accessible.** This does not only entail making data available but also ensuring it is user-friendly and comprehensible for peacebuilders.
- **Follow the „do no harm“ principle as a fundamental benchmark for the usage of data.**
- **Minimize the carbon footprint of data processes and promote environmentally-sustainable practices in data management.**
- **Establish interdisciplinary working groups that include representatives from academia, NGOs, local communities, and government agencies.**
- **Leverage interdisciplinary collaboration.** Diverse expertise can lead to innovative and comprehensive solutions for environmental peacebuilding.
- **Initiate joint projects.** Launch pilot projects that require the input of environmental scientists, conflict resolution experts, technologists, and social scientists.
- **Develop shared online platforms for continuous dialogue and resource-sharing among stakeholders.**
- **Ensure transparency in the implementation of digital tools and actively involve communities in the process.** Trust is essential for the successful adoption of digital technologies in peacebuilding efforts.

Participatory Approaches to Climate Change and Conflict

Participatory processes have the potential to contribute to climate and environmental justice. In times of growing right-wing populism, participatory processes can bring disillusioned citizens back into the political process. In addition, participation has the effect of including as many people as possible in necessary climate-related changes so that these changes enjoy increased popular understanding and support.

Thus, participation is one way to prevent or deal with climate-related conflict. Conflict can thus be seen as an enabler, rather than a preventer, of climate justice, as it makes tensions and injustices in the green transition visible and can thereby lead to changes. To harness the potential of conflict and at the same time to mitigate its risks, participation is a promising approach.

This approach paves the way for more inclusive and sustainable solutions in comparison to mere top-down approaches. Participation can fill gaps in representative democracies, especially as it can include people who may be excluded or disengaged from other processes.

Nevertheless, the outcomes of participatory processes are not always followed up on by concrete action at the political level, leading to frustration among participants. Process planning should therefore consider how the participatory process can be well linked to other policy and decision-making processes.

In all cases, research-based information should be provided at the beginning and throughout the participatory process. Scientists can thus give feedback about the feasibility and implications of proposals.

- **Commit to honesty, not neutrality, in times of climate and environmental crisis, including clarity about the scientific baseline that directs any participatory process.**
- **Utilize opportunities generated by conflict.** Conflict can be an obstacle to change if it is prolonged or avoided for fear of tension. But if approached with courage and openness, it can be a catalyst for positive change.
- **Create low-threshold and inclusive processes.**
- **Establish thorough coordination mechanisms that commit to implementing results.**

Peace Education for all Generations

Narratives, identities, personal stories, experiences, and a true interest in ‘the other’ are influencing factors of peace education engagement. Often, conflicts are hidden in and thus prolonged by education. Non-violent change and transformation must be driven by interdisciplinary approaches on all levels, including tolerance towards ambiguity and grey areas. Peace education should therefore not be restricted in any way to the formal education of young people and should instead address all age and social groups as well as other multipliers and politicians.

At the same time, in order to identify solutions and make peace education fit for the future, younger generations must be included. Depending on the focus, young people could even lead processes, rather than simply being on the receiving end of peace education. Young people can serve as educators themselves and not just the educated, for example by educating older generations (the ‘digital illiterates’) about the new realities created by the online world and the world of social media. Without doubt, a greater focus must be put on the virtual and digital world, as it has become increasingly a part of the real world and a space for conflict and violence.

Peace education holds great potential. However, there are also professional and personal limits that must be recognized. Whoever teaches peace must not only learn theories or methods but also develop a willingness for self-reflection, self-care, and mental health. In addition to a culture of peace, there is a clear need for a culture of conflict and an increased conflict literacy that recognizes conflict as part of human nature, showing us that somethings must be changed, albeit non-violently.

- **Recognize the potential and limitations of education.** Education can indeed prolong conflict, and peace education should not be limited to youth and formal education only.
- **Engage youth.** Young people should educate older generations about their reality, in particular the virtual world.
- **Encourage peace educators to apply self-reflection in addition to theory and methods.**



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