

# A Future for Peace – Initial Answers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Austrian Forum for Peace

**A World of Growing Unpredictability** - The global rise in violence, including the ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, the renewed rivalry between great powers, the worsening loss of livelihoods driven by the climate crisis, and the effects of often uncontrolled technological change dramatically impact peace, security, and stability around the world. Efforts to facilitate peace and resolve conflict find themselves increasingly deadlocked in a rapidly changing world characterized by fragmentation, polarization, and unpredictability.

**Violence on the Rise Globally** - The number and intensity of conflicts has grown substantially in the last decade. According to the Global Peace Index 2023, the global level of peacefulness has deteriorated for the ninth consecutive year leading to an increase in the number of conflict-related deaths by 96 percent in 2022, making 2022 the deadliest year for armed conflict since the 1994 Rwandan genocide. As a result, about two billion people live in regions affected by armed conflict and more than 100 million are forcibly displaced.

**Experts from Five Continents Met in Stadtschlaining in Search for Ways Forward** - The Austrian Forum for Peace (AFP) was established in 2023 as a new format to discuss established and emerging approaches to conflict work and peacebuilding, and to contribute to the global search for sustainable peace within a new emerging world order. The first AFP was held at the Schlaining Castle in July.

The forum attracted about 400 participants from 30 countries and five continents. Its different formats, including keynote speeches, panel discussions, and thematic workshops, greatly benefitted from the diversity and scope of experience, approaches, and perspectives of experts from the fields of peace and conflict studies, practical conflict resolution, policymaking, and diplomacy. The AFP also attracted university students and the general population interested in the future of peace.



**The “Schlaining way Forward” for Peace** - In addition to new networks and partnerships for peace established at the AFP, it also led to concrete findings, products, and recommendations, which will inform the ACP’s future work in conflict resolution, peace research, capacity building, and peace education.

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**Addressing the Deadlocks in Official Peace Processes** - In many contexts, conflicts are framed as “bargaining chips” between great power rivals and mediation efforts become part of international competition. We therefore observe growing degrees of internationalization and a resulting instrumentalization of conflicts. 91 countries are at least partially involved in some form of external conflict. Therefore, also the UN Security Council is struggling to make decisions, resulting in a minimalistic approach of negative peace rather than transformative peacebuilding mandates. The consequence of these dynamics is frequently prolonged conflict and a deadlock in negotiations.

Informal dialogue can build trust and trigger ideas. Linking it to an official process can help to break the deadlock.

When there is a considerable blockage at the international level, delinking the local from the international can be a possible approach to free the local conflicts from global power dynamics.

At the same time, possibilities to interlink local efforts with peace processes at an international level remain very important.

Peace facilitators should look for entry points for cooperation, separating these from the broader process – as exemplified by the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

A lesson from community-based mediation: focus on the parties, rather than pre-conceived methodology.

### **Conflict and the Climate Crisis – a Double Burden and an Opportunity**

July 2023 was the hottest month ever recorded on our planet. Among the 25 countries most affected by the climate crisis, a majority is also struggling with armed conflict. Countries at war where structures have been destroyed need support to deal with the threats posed by the climate crisis. This dynamic is both an additional challenge for conflict countries and an opportunity. Conflict analysis today needs to factor in the environment as a trigger for war and a catalyst for peace.

Since climate change affects everyone beyond national and ethno-political borders, it can be an ideal entry point, including in situations of deadlock, to build trust between conflict parties and establish common goals.

Trust can become cooperation, and cooperation can subsequently contribute to broader conflict resolution efforts.

Ideally the climate-conflict nexus is addressed by a comprehensive, multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach, including multilateral, governmental, civil society, academic and local community levels.

The effects of the climate crisis evolve rapidly. Practical efforts constantly need to be linked to research, fostering methodological innovation and timely responses, putting the needs of populations most affected at the center of peacebuilding efforts.

The ACP is developing such approaches in the Persian Gulf and in Libya.

**Training for staff of the UN, EU, or OSCE should be tailor-made and integrate climate sensitivity into all aspects of peacebuilding to:**

Improve the understanding of climate- and environment-related risks and threats to peace and security as well as tools to identify possible entry points for environmental peacebuilding.

Bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Promote the application of findings across conflict analysis, project management, and operations.

As a concrete product, ACP will pilot an international training course on “Environmental Peacebuilding” in November 2023.

**In an Increasingly Complex World: More Research to Support Practical Peace Work -**

An important conclusion from the forum and the ACP’s work is the need to increase resources and space for peace and conflict research. Promoting and strengthening peace research to produce a fact-based foundation for practical peace work is especially important in this time of increasing anxiety, polarization, and scepticism towards science in general, triggered by the level of complexity the world is facing. Ongoing changes and emerging phenomena need to be captured adequately and analysed empirically through transdisciplinary approaches, factoring in aspects from neighbouring fields such as anthropology, psychology, and environmental science when analysing political, peace and conflict dynamics.

**„Good Technology?” – Utilizing Technology to Foster Peace**

The exponential growth of information technologies, the availability of an abundance of data affected the world we live in profoundly. New technologies are playing an ever-increasing role in the dynamics of violent conflicts.

Under the label PeaceTech, social media, geographic information systems (GIS), data analytics, virtual reality (VR) frameworks and other digital technologies can provide analytical support to better understand and monitor conflicts and for situational awareness and forecasting. Additionally, they can create innovation in training as well as scale up peacebuilding efforts.



Consider the potential of digital technologies such as mixed or virtual reality training frameworks or online trainings.

Geo-referenced and dynamically visualised peace and conflict data (such as interactive maps) allow predicting various types of conflicts before they arise.

The ACP is engaging actively with new technologies offered to the field of peace and conflict resolution work, while also critically engaging with ethical and methodological challenges, particularly including the growing development of Artificial Intelligence.

**The Relevance for Neutral Actors in International Mediation Remains** - Increasingly, third parties to conflict have positioned themselves as mediators despite, at times, playing an active role in supporting conflict parties. Mediation then becomes a tool for geopolitical competition. In addition, these states often lack experience and structures for effective mediation. They often propose a so-called developmental peace, which emphasizes stability and economic prosperity rather than transformative peace and institution-building.

Carefully analyse the motivation of mediating actors and their approaches to peace processes.

States classically considered as well suited for international mediation to consider the conclusions for their own approaches.

At the same time, it is also obvious that there is a demand for such classical mediation actors, often small neutral countries, as they are more likely to be perceived as honest brokers. From the practical experience of the ACP, this also applies to Austria.

Strengthen engagement in international and informal mediation in the form of an active neutrality policy and as part of a new national security strategy, also considering Austria's candidacy for a 2026 UN Security Council membership.

Experiences show that relevant capacities must be in place among both government and civil society actors, and that a successful and effective approach occurs through partnerships and synergies among these actors.

Instruments such as the Mediation Facility in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are a good means to this end and should be expanded.

The development of an Austrian Civilian Peace Service ("Ziviler Friedensdienst") should enable the strategic deployment of qualified civilian experts to conflict regions.

**Education for Peace at All Levels** - Educating (for) peace has been one of the core pillars of our work since 1982. Peace-making and peacebuilding are not only political acts but social processes. They are tasks for politicians and experts as well as the responsibility of society at large. To facilitate a culture of peace, a multitrack approach is needed, addressing all levels and all parts of society. Investing in peace education means investing in the prevention of violent conflict, as well as in conflict transformation and in peacebuilding. "Lasting peace", involving all levels and all key aspects, can – if ever – only be achieved by also including peace education in training and capacity-building efforts which was reconfirmed by national and international experts at the AFP.