

Living Crisis, Building Peace

Exploring the Repercussions of the Covid-19-Crisis
on Local Peacebuilding Initiatives in Africa



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Abstract

For the African continent, historically conflict-ridden and home to some of the poorest populations worldwide, the Covid-19-pandemic is commonly described as crisis of unprecedented magnitude whose global ramifications transcend every dimension of daily life, for millions of people.

This study explores the repercussions of the Covid-19-crisis on local peacebuilding initiatives in eight West- and Central- to East-African countries. It operationalizes a three-fold theoretical framework charting out the relationship between positive peace and democratic procedure for sustainable development.

Conducting mail-in interviews with local peacebuilding activists from different contexts, the study captures a diverse selection of voices from a plurality of personal and professional backgrounds. The findings indicate that the Covid-19-crisis' primary (health) and secondary (social, economic and private) ramifications have severely limited local peacebuilders in their capabilities to facilitate peace negotiations within and across their communities. The sum of impacts has exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic inequalities and bred mental health issues, in turn adversely affecting integrative ties, social cohesion and stability among community members. Against this background it becomes clear that working towards 'peace, justice and inclusive institutions' (SDG16) during and beyond such unparalleled times will crucially depend on local actors as much as on the international community.

Key words: Positive Peace, Local Associative Peacebuilding, Democratic Participation, Sustainable Development

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1 Introduction

The 16th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) ‘Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions’ (United Nations (UN) SDG16) acknowledges the need to ‘promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’ (ibid.). In its 2020 SDGs-report, almost a year after the Coronavirus-pandemic had hit close to all countries around the globe, the UN state that ‘Covid-19-implications further threaten global peace and security’ (UN 2020, 21). Yet how precisely do the dynamics of this global health crisis affect local infrastructures of peace? How do they touch culturally embedded conflict resolution and social justice mechanisms, and the inclusiveness and resilience of institutions on the ground?

This multiple-case study aims to explore the multidimensional impacts of the Covid-19-crisis on local civic peacebuilding efforts based on individual accounts from a selection of countries in West-, Central- and East-Africa. Uncovering the crisis’ repercussions for peaceful, just and inclusive societies, this contributes to a greater understanding of its implications not only for peace and reconciliation mechanisms but for accessible and accountable local institutions. The research thus constitutes a first step on the road to investigate, comprehend and ultimately alleviate the pandemic’s fallout on processes of local sustainable development.

2 Background and Empirical Literature

2.1 Peace, Civil Society and Development on the African Continent

Over the past decades, Africa has stuck with the infamous status of the world's epicenter of armed conflicts, lawlessness and state terrorism (Abdulrahman et Tar 2008). In 2020, the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa concluded that 'conflict is still Africa's biggest challenge' (Allison 2020). This matters since peace and stability are commonly perceived to be essential preconditions not only of economic growth but of sustainable development at large (UN SDG 16, High Level Panel (HLP) 2014). In 2017, the top 10 ODA-donors invested 52,800 million US-dollar (net disbursements; OECD 2019) in development aid to African countries, mostly designated to social sectors such as education, health, government and civil society (ibid.). Meanwhile, transnational think tank 'International Crisis Group' states that 'if development assistance is offered by donors without thought to its impact on conflict prevention and resolution, it is likely to be unproductive at best and counterproductive at worst' (Soderberg 2005). In other words: Peace and (economic) development 'cooperate towards a common goal' (Aikins 2016, 2).

Conflict in Africa is no static phenomenon. Just as its global geo-strategic environment and local circumstances have changed significantly over time, conflict patterns have shifted from state-based to greater amounts of non-state violence, notably by armed groups and within the community.

Similarly, the post-Cold War environment of peace and conflict studies has seen an ever-greater inclusion of stakeholders from different levels – from traditional state entities to multinational corporations, from international NGOs to local grassroots organizations, acknowledging that, 'while conflict has many roots' – and faces – 'today's most intense conflicts will not be dealt with fully by focusing on states and governments alone' (Saunders 2001, 74). Instead, the ramifications of political tensions, social injustice and economic inequalities transcend all levels of society and human co-habitancy (Abdulrahman et Tar 2008).

Albeit the role of civil society in conflict mediation and reconciliation is still much unexplored, empirical research suggests that an active civil society fostering choice, trust and democratic virtues (Spurk et Paffenholz 2006, Orjuela 2005, Young 2000) can play a significant role for sustained peacebuilding. The establishment of the African Union's civil society forum 'Economic, Social and Cultural Council' (ECOSOCC) in 2004 also acknowledges civil society's instrumental virtues for integration, democratization and development (Nduwimana 2004). Similarly, exploring people's views in 18 different countries regarding the relevance and meaning they attached to civil society as driver for development

though the advancement of peace, Aikins (2016) found that overall, they embraced an inclusivist notion of peacebuilding. Like that, peacebuilding and development are perceived as mutually beneficial processes working towards a shared objective (ibid., 14).

These findings confirm that peace, civic engagement and development cannot be assessed in an isolated, clear-cut manner. They need to take into account the complex interplay of local the stakeholders' diverse and multifaceted realities transcending each one of these elements.

2.2 Covid-19 and Civic Peacebuilding

The full force and consequences of the pandemic arrived in different African countries at slightly different times, starting with the first African case of Covid-19 reported in Algeria in February 2020 (WHO Situation Report (SR) 01, 2020). By the end of April, 46 out of 47 World Health Organization (WHO)-member countries had been affected by outbreaks of the new Coronavirus (WHO SR 09, 2020). While South Africa, Algeria, Cameroon and Ghana were impacted the most severe, Algeria, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) suffered the highest fatality ratios among countries with widespread transmission (April 2020; WHO SR 08, 2020). Severe pre-conditions in countries such as the DRC just recovering from the major Ebola outbreak in 2018 add to the fragile social and economic situation which much of the population lives in (WHO Weekly Bulletin 04/2021). Although a year into the pandemic, overall cases tend to fall, the physical, social and economic consequences of the Covid-19-crisis still dictate the daily conduct of most African people. Additional struggles such as new outbreaks of the Ebola disease namely in the DRC and Guinea and the escalating humanitarian crisis in Mozambique just add on to the bill (ibid.).

Individual national measures to curb the spread of the virus vary among the countries. Meanwhile, most responses rely on mobility restrictions for travel and trade across national, at times regional, borders. In May 2020, 23 African countries had implemented lockdowns (WHO Strategic Response Plan 2020), including the closure of schools, social institutions, public services, and popular gatherings. These public health measures (PHMs) significantly affected national economic productivity, their sum causing socio-economic hardships of unprecedented levels for most of the populations (ibid.).

Due to the relative novelty of the Coronavirus-pandemic with its particular implications, not much research on its deeper social and political ramifications on the community level could be carried out to the time writing. Furthermore, most attention had been paid to its most immediate effects on countries' economic and political environment (OECD 2021, World Bank Group 2020, Herrera et al. 2020).

Meanwhile, in April 2020, international charity Peace Direct in collaboration with Danish organization Conductive Space for Peace held a round of consultations with 400 local peacebuilders from over 60 countries (CSP 2020). Their key findings confirm the crisis' exacerbating effect on underlying roots of conflict, especially inequality, the erosion of established peacebuilding initiatives through social distancing measures, the mental health toll, and the challenges for peacebuilders to sustain their work despite reduced financial support as donor attention shifts. On a

positive note, the crisis has facilitated ceasefire agreements, mutual aid and community-building, and ‘a chance to reconnect as a global community’ (ibid., 2).

Politically, some governments profit from the crisis seeking to advance their own agendas (ibid.). Freedom House report ‘Democracy under Lockdown’ (2020), one of the most in-depth assessments of the pandemic’s impacts on democratic systems around the globe, found that ‘the condition of democracy and human rights has grown worse in 80 countries’ (p. 1) – a problem particularly dire in flailing democracies and extremely repressive states. On the African continent, longtime playground for European power quarrels where intersectional divides and entrenched conflicts are deeply woven into the socio-political fabric, the pandemic fallout is assumed to have weakened democratic properties in most states (Freedom House 2020).

3 Research Question

There is still a significant lack of understanding in the literature regarding the intricate relationship between civic engagement, peacebuilding, and democratic processes – the ‘real’ difference people-to-people interactions can make (Gawerc 2006) to translate grassroots activism into structural change. Therefore, more research needs to explore the consequences of the current crisis for local civic peacebuilding efforts in African nations. Conceptualizing peace not only as virtue in itself but as essential condition for inclusive institutions and just societies for sustainable development, the findings from such investigations offer precious insights beyond the immediate context of this study.

Just as the virus currently headlines every aspect of daily life in most African countries, peace is often described as the one central need transcending all other struggles (Aikins 2016). The analysis is based on qualitative data collected through mail-in interviews with individuals working for local civic peacebuilding and community development organizations in eight African countries. Theorizing local ‘people-to-people’-peacebuilding activities not only as inherently democratic in Habermasian tradition but moreover as fundamental feature of political participation, the overarching aim of this study is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the implications the Covid-19-crisis has for sustainable peace and reconciliation in local African communities. To this end, it investigates the changes, challenges, and opportunities local ‘associative’ (Galtung 1976a) peacebuilding initiatives have experienced since the arrival of the pandemic in Spring 2020.

Briefly, the central research question reads as follows: *How are associative peacebuilding initiatives by local civil society organizations operating in West- and Central to East-Africa affected by the ramifications of the Covid-19-crisis 2020/21?*

4 Theoretical Framework

The study's analytical framework draws from a number of theoretical strands from peace and conflict, democracy, and international development studies in order to adequately situate the findings not only within the African context of conflict and reconciliation but to reach more general conclusions about the pandemic's impacts on democratic sharing for sustainable development in the region. The theoretical framework is threefold: Following Galtung's 'Three Approaches to Peace' (1976a) offers precious insights into the universal rationale of positive 'associative' peacebuilding. Its principles provide the theoretical grounds for a multidimensional understanding of the role local peacebuilding initiatives play in constructing a resilient infrastructure of peace (*ibid.*). Building on Galtung, three components are identified as essential features of associative 'people-to-people' (P2P)-peacebuilding efforts. These constitute the theoretical body which guides the analysis. The overarching framework relates civic peacebuilding with theories of democratic participation from a sustainable development perspective.

4.1 Positive Peace and Associative Peacebuilding

'Peace' constitutes a highly contested term. Often, especially by governments and mainstream academia, it is defined as the absence of war, of direct threats and physical violence (Gawerc 2006). This narrow definition of peace proves problematic given peace is often perceived differently by the different factions involved in a particular conflict at a time. Galtung contributed enormously to the contemporary understanding of peace by differentiating between negative peace as absence of immediate violence and positive peace characterized by the absence of structural and cultural violence (Galtung 1981). Consequently, while negative peace might not rely on justice *per se*, the processes of reconciliation and psychosocial healing underpinning positive peace presuppose the overcoming of factors that exacerbate inequalities and blind people to injustices (Miall et al. 2016).

Galtung's (1976a) three approaches to peace distinguish between 'peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding' (p. 282). Within international relations literature, peacebuilding represents the least understood and least tended to by researchers (Gawerc 2006). It is widely conceptualized as dynamic, reflexive and responsive to current needs depending on the particular phase of the conflict accommodation efforts (Lederach 1998).

Galtung's (1976a) framework for associative peacebuilding formulates six 'conditions of association' (p. 299) whereof the first three – 'equity', 'entropy' and 'symbiosis' – are lent from development-theory. More precisely, equity refers to horizontal interactions between a particular set of actors in relatively symmetric patterns (*ibid.*). Building onto equity, entropy points to the relative weight of interaction channels between different actors, rather than their sheer quantity.

Ideally, the total amount of interaction should be distributed evenly across all channels, for example regarding interactions between governmental and civic agencies. Thus, another term to describe entropy would be democracy (ibid., 300). Finally, symbiosis as ‘negotiation of mutual isolation’ (ibid.) becomes a crucial precondition for a sustainable peace structure: Not only does it facilitate exchange and diversity among groups but anchoring them in a peaceful co-existence and cooperation through reciprocal relationships, it prevents their detachment from one another.

4.1.1 Limitations

Galtung (1976a) differentiates between vertical, zero and horizontal social interactions. Meanwhile, the latter proves most relevant for this study. Since there is nonetheless an ‘extremely broad variety of people-to-people interaction’ (p. 298) on all levels, it is still possible to draw valuable inferences of general significance from Galtung’s framework. On a related note, Galtung (1976a) himself mentions that his associative peacebuilding theory relates predominantly to territorial entities (p. 299). Nonetheless, for the ‘conditions of association’ (ibid.) do not presuppose the kind of actors addressed, he also states that, if generally they seek to establish a structure of positive peace, any actors should adhere to these principles.

4.2 P2P-Initiatives in Local Peacebuilding

Local peacebuilding has been but little operationalized in the literature due to the relative haziness of activities under this umbrella term. Especially in ‘local’ settings – typically referring to a district, community, or neighborhood (Peace Direct 2019) – initiatives are often small-scale and dispersed, receiving less publicity, and working with the economic, social and psychological environment at grassroots levels (Galtung 1976b). They provide a meeting ground for a representative sample of voices to resolve particular problems, reflecting underlying community dynamics and building on, or collaborating with, local power structures (Peace Direct 2019). Briefly, ‘local peacebuilding initiatives are (...) focused on addressing the needs and concerns of a particular group of people whose engagement is essential for peace but who may otherwise be excluded’ (ibid., 24). Many local peacebuilding activities encompass communication and information initiatives, media and public advocacy, but also leisure such as music, arts and sports (Abdulrahman et Tar 2008, Rothstein 1999, Saunders 2001). These predominantly rely on direct, physical ‘P2P’-exchange between the stakeholders. Apart from nursing a sense of shared interest and commonality, the genuine value of such activities fosters ‘cross-cutting integrative ties that have a true functional value’ (Gawerc 2006, 446). There is a broad consensus that their symbolic and cultural virtues help establish social relationships reaching across conflictual divides (Kaufmann 1997, Rothstein 1999, Ryan 1995, Spurk et Paffenholz 2006).

According to Kelman (1999), positive peace in the wake of deeply entrenched conflicts depends on multiple factors, amongst them mutual acceptance and cooperative interaction between communities. Research finds that number and

strength of integrative ties play a significant role in conflict mediation. Thus, communities with more inter-communal exchange are more peaceful than those with less interactions between different groups (Orjuela 2005, Varshney in Orjuela 2005). This dialogue of ‘ordinary interested members’ (Gawerc 2006, 447) of the society rather than influential power holders may transform tense relationships towards connections of equality and trust (Rothstein 1999, Ryan 1995). Thus, ‘associative’ peacebuilding initiatives fostering horizontal relationships and cooperative action prove essential to address needs for structural change in a meaningful and just manner since they help restructure ‘the social, material, and political fabric of societies’ (Gawerc 2006, 446). Consequently, they play a leading part in the co-creation of comprehensive and resilient infrastructures of positive peace.

4.2.1 Democratic Participation: Public Discourse and Communicative Action

Intra- and inter-community dialogue do not only play a significant role fostering horizontal relationships and reciprocal cooperations between individuals and groups but represents an essential feature of democratic discourse and practice. According to Habermas (1971), access to, and participation in, the public discourse constitutes the cornerstone of civic exchange. It provides the central mean to negotiate and articulate important matters. Moreover, the deliberation of public opinion, notably the expression of critical voices, facilitates both mutual responsiveness and accountability between politicians and their constituents. An open and vivid private-public discourse hence represents a crucial element of democratic participation and legitimacy (ibid.). Is public discourse limited, for instance through bans on public gatherings and direct exchange, this democratic property is significantly weakened. In turn, the arising accountability and legitimacy issues fuel conflicts over power and influence (Orjuela 2005).

Meanwhile, scholars such as Diamond and McDonald (1996), Hubbard (2001) and Saunders (2001) raise the question whether P2P-peacebuilding activities and dialogue have the strategic foresight and persistent drive that lead to political action. Following Habermas, communicative action is shaped through processes of deliberation and negotiation between various individuals. Distinct from solely instrumental action, it rests on a common set of norms and values – a shared notion of the situation – taking into account inter-subjective, social and normative interpretations (Habermas 1987). Like that, communicative action relies on the equal exchange, negotiation and cooperation among individuals with at times different occupations and priorities.

Local associative peacebuilding supports the development of exactly such qualities. It promotes dialogue between private individuals, but furthermore enables private-public exchange and political discourse through popular mobilization and advocacy. Consequently, local peacebuilding projects are not only inherently democratic in Galtung’scher tradition (1976a) but carry the potential to translate such informal ways of democratic participation into structural change aiming for greater inclusiveness and political sharing. However, these factors are crucially dependent on sufficient space and means for communication in both the private and public sphere.

4.2.2 Limitations

According to Habermas (1971), reducing barriers to discursive participation, for instance by expanding democratic rights, extends openness as well as inclusiveness of public action. On the contrary, when tensions and violence are on the rise, meeting becomes more difficult both on a practical as well as an emotional level (Saunders 2001, Ryan 1995). With less direct exchange, polarization and political radicalization grow.

Similarly, Kriesberg (2001) asserts that to reach mutual agreements in conflictual situations, people need to be non-absolute regarding their goals and priorities. Since these possibly differ due to the specific circumstances and values different people place on different objectives, there will always be tradeoffs. P2P-initiatives help negotiate competing interests and advance settlements. Again, rising tensions drastically reduce room for compromise. Here, integrative ties prove key to lower tensions even as they are recognized as catalyzers for political action and structural transformation (Gawerc 2006).

As Gamson (1992) mentions, ‘on most political issues, there are competing interpretations, ways of framing information and facts’ (p. 67). Hence civic actors are constantly engaged in a symbolic contest over meaning and perceptions (ibid.). Some of the tensions stemming from different stakeholders’ colliding framings are reflected in the data collected for this study.

Lastly, relating to the other through P2P-initiatives ‘cannot erase, or contradict, the realities of life’ (Al-Shobaki 1997). P2P-projects constitute no stand-alone strategy. As much as equal relationships matter in Galtung’scher tradition, vertical capacity between actors from different ‘levels’ (policy, community and grassroots; see Lederach 1998) remain essential if local action is to translate into political clout. Diamond and McDonald (1996) and Saunders (2001) make similar points regarding problems of ‘transfer’ from the local level and of ‘translation’ of citizen’s knowledge into policy changes.

4.3 Associative Peacebuilding and Democratic Participation for Sustainable Development

There is a rolling discussion regarding the ambivalent relationship between peace, democracy and development (Burnell et Rakner 2014).

In Prezeworski’s (1999) minimal definition, democracy constitutes first and foremost a way of processing conflict. Likewise, participatory theories of democracy place a high premium on the ‘development of reciprocal relationships of trust between individuals’ (Grugel 2002, 23) to contain and resolve power struggles (ibid.). Relating to the Habermasian school of public discourse and communicative action, democratic systems draw their central strengths from popular support and participation of the people, furthermore providing it with internal accountability and external legitimacy (Orjuela 2005). Especially in democratic systems, but to similar extent in non-democratic environments, local and communal support for a particular cause proves vital to either legitimize political leaders’ actions or pressure them for change (Saunders 2001).

Thus exceeding a sheer market-based approach, ‘good governance’ based on government legitimacy and accountability, rule of law and human rights (Grindle 2010) has been recognized as vital contribution to development as ‘environmental stability and efforts to tackle social inequality and poverty in an integrated and balanced way’ (Greene 2003 in Shie 2004, 7). While a just and inclusive peace is engrained in political and rights-based approaches to development (Aikins 2016), it also constitutes a key element underpinning sustainable development such as defined by the UN (UN SDG16). For further elaborations on the theoretical linkage between associative peacebuilding, democratic participation and sustainable development, see *appendix 1*. Conclusively, local associative peacebuilding through P2P-initiatives as theorized above contributes to a conducive environment for progressively inclusive political settlements. They facilitate democratic dialogue and mobilization, advance ‘good governance’ practices and contribute to sustainable development processes especially in historically diverse, conflict-ridden or contested societies.

4.4 Summary

This linkage between associative peace, democratic participation and sustainable development provides the overarching premise for the analysis. Popular participation in itself can be seen as democracy’s highest virtue (Pateman 1970). Civic activism placing social, economic and cultural empowerment at the center can play a vital role advancing basic democratic rights at the community level. As demonstrated above, positive peace equally transcends as it underpins these efforts.

Egalitarian interactions among different actors, a democratic order of communication and organization, and a diversity of exchange constitute three central components to foster resilient structures of peace based on equality and justice (Galtung 1976a, Miall et al. 2016). Consequently, horizontal relationships, rich and reciprocal cooperations and democratic dialogue and action between a plurality of local stakeholders are conceptualized as key properties of associative ‘P2P’-peacebuilding initiatives co-creating conducive spaces for ever more inclusive political settlements.

Since sustainable development presupposes conflict resolution, reduced inequalities and social justice which are common outcomes of democratic struggles, examining the pandemic’s impacts on local associative P2P-peacebuilding allows for valuable inferences on the political implications of this crisis from a sustainable development perspective.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The research is designed as multiple-case study relying on qualitative data collected through semi-structured mail-in interviews. This approach was chosen to best suit the empirical realities of the people on the ground (e.g., unstable network connections and other technological hazards) derived from the participants' indications during previous contact. Most importantly, the methodological considerations were guided by the primary objectives to ensure participants felt comfortable, the questions were meaningful to them, and the exchange was reciprocal in that they helped provide data for the study and received the findings in return enabling them to conduct, as one participant said, 'advocacy with evidence'.

Using mail-in interviews, participants were free to answer the questions in their own pace, at a location and time they felt most comfortable with it (Willis 2006). This way, the data could be collected in the most natural setting possible given the (currently unavertable) physical separation of researcher and researched. Besides, the interview was provided in both English and French language recognizing the francophone background of participants especially from the DRC and Cameroon. This improved equal access, understanding and expression for all within the written conversation (Bujra 2006). The sum of these features constitutes a vital premise to gain 'rich, in-depth information which provides the potential for understanding the complexities of social life' (Patton 2002 in Steward-Withers et al. 2014, 59).

Due to the relative novelty of the pandemic, much more comprehensive research on this topic is yet to be produced. Qualitative research proves especially suited to the task since it aims to explore people's experiences; how their realities have been affected, which concerns and motivations are provoked (Steward-Withers et al. 2014). Here, a carefully crafted multiple case-study yields more insights than a single-case design (De Vaus 2001), capturing a rather broad range of 'contested' meanings (Gamson 1992). Acknowledging peacebuilder's continuous struggles over meaning and representation in interplay with other stakeholders aids to analyze the interviews attentive to the participant's own subjectivity and position them within the broader discourse.

The semi-structured interview questions were developed after carefully studying the context and empirical material available to ensure a sound fit between participant's realities and research inquiry (Simon 2006): Not only should the topic, research problem and interview questions be relevant to the academic field in its theoretical and empirical dimensions, but also relate to 'what really matters' to the people on the ground.

The questions were standardized across all participants, featuring a relatively straight-forward phrasing in order to highlight the research's explicit interest to the respondents. This proves especially crucial since direct queries are not possible in

this interview format. The two opening questions constituted factual inquiries. They provide some context even as a detailed investigation of participant's specific local to national work environments exceeds the scope of this study. Like that, they allow to situate and cross-reference the findings within participant's overall situation assessment (see *analysis, figure 2*). Since the aim was to generate rich, in-depth data across a plurality of contexts, all further questions were phrased open-ended and exploratory, explicitly encouraging participants to elaborate on their replies. This permitted them to develop their ideas and indicate own priorities depending on their experiences and circumstances (Willis 2006).

5.2 Sampling and Participants

Participants were approached mainly through previous contact established during a personal internship at the International Peace Bureau. A few responses were generated through snowballing by those contacts (*ibid.*), as well as further African peacebuilding organizations that are part of the IPB-network with whom no previous contact had been made. This multifaceted sampling strategy encouraged diversity within their discipline even as it ensured a sound fit of participant's background and experience with the study's central aim. For privacy reasons, the names of individual respondents remain undisclosed. To enhance transparency, their organizations are listed in *table 1, appendix 2*, including a detailed overview about their location and mission focus.

Overall, the organizations reside in eight African countries, encompassing one transnational initiative (labelled after its headquarters in Burundi). From Central- to West-Africa, responses to the study came from Cameroun (4), Ghana (1, 3, 6, 8), Liberia (5), Nigeria (9). Burundi (13), DRC (2, 12), Rwanda (7, 11) and Uganda (10) represented Central- to East-Africa (geographic designations after UN Geoscheme; see *figure 1*). Their main occupations entail, among others, peace and community development, justice and human rights, youth empowerment and vulnerable groups. In the following, participants' responses are referred to either by their organizations' acronym or the numbers allocated to individual responses.

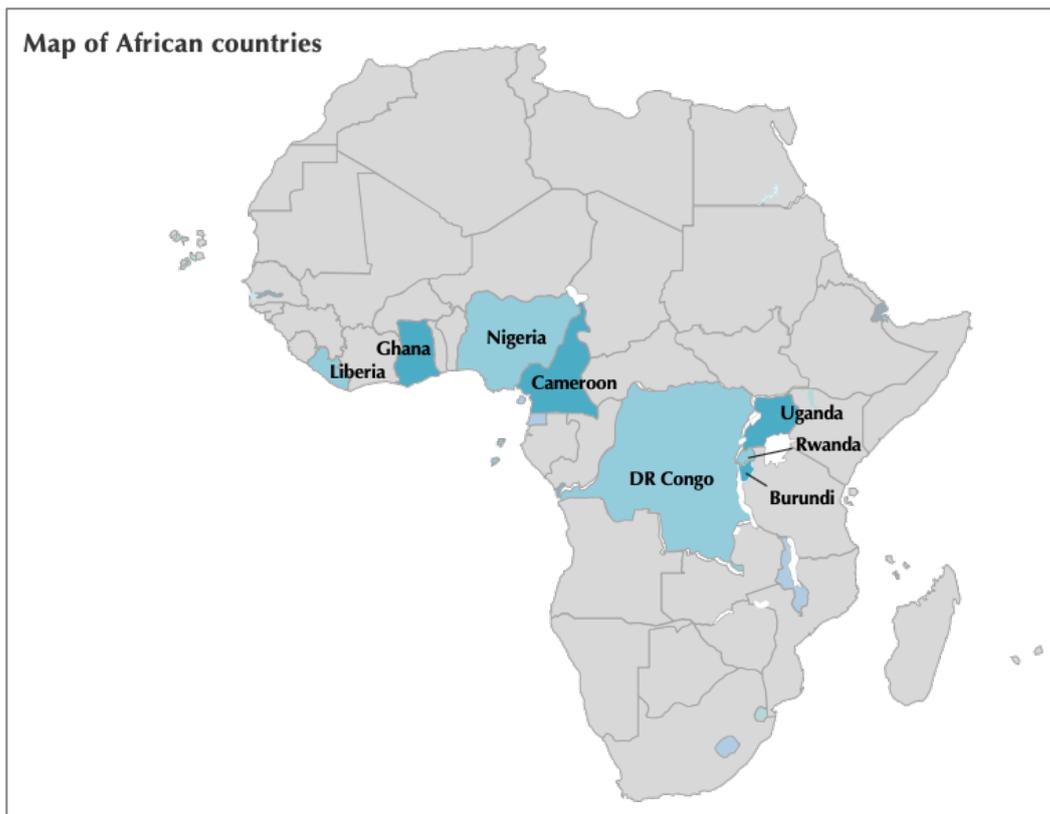


Figure 1: Map of African countries where participants of the study are located. Source: Own design, Smartdraw 2021.

5.3 Data Analysis

The research design acknowledges the virtues of reiteration and interpretation at the heart of qualitative analytical processes (Walliman 2011). Continuous feedback loops between theoretical grounds, method and empirical evidence ensured the sound fit between all components of the research design. Hence the argumentation and subsequent conclusion were constantly tested against the empirical evidence and adjusted accordingly. Developing the codes dynamically contributed greatly to ‘understand participants views and actions from their own perspectives’ (Linneberg et Korsgaard 2019, 9) all the while staying close to the ‘structure and theoretical relevance’ (ibid., 14) of the study.

The data analysis was then performed in the three steps of data reduction, display and conclusion as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Utilizing a blended approach, it paid careful attention not to decontextualize the data during the reduction process in order to stay true to the embedded nature of the phenomenon under study (Linneberg et Korsgaard 2019). For a full account of the coding frame, see *appendix 2*. The final conclusion and discussion thus present the results of a curious, self-critical and thorough inquiry on the lived experiences of local peacebuilders during times of global crisis.

5.4 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to the principle of ‘ethics from the bottom up’ (Banks et Scheyvens 2014, 161) ensuring participants privacy, safety and dignity as well a certain degree of reciprocity. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, free, and did not affect any personal or professional ties. Respondents were informed thoroughly and repeatedly, giving their full consent before answering the questions. Interview replies were fully anonymized to prevent participants from any future harm, however unintended, by sharing their perspectives on socially and politically sensitive topics. Nevertheless, they had the option to indicate their name at the end of the interview should they explicitly wish to be mentioned. This aimed to ensure their contributions receive all due credit and recognition. For extended reflections on researcher positionality, see *appendix 2*.

5.5 Limitations

Despite said virtues of a multiple case-study design for this research, it remains essential to acknowledge the historically and geographically extremely diverse settings wherein the participants operate. Further factors to consider include, but are not limited to, nationally distinct economic activities and global connectedness, social structures and ethno-cultural make-up, political systems and demographics.

Besides, much small-scale, diversified and non-linear community initiatives are difficult to tangibly measure (Gawerc 2006). As Saunders (2001) points out, social science research designs are inapt to investigate capacity, linkages, political processes and intertwined networks of social interactions, much less define which of the multiple actors ‘caused’ a particular outcome within continuously changing circumstances. Likewise, hypothetical ‘ripple’ and ‘sleeper’ effects from horizontal interactions (Salomon 1997) prove equally hard to assess but need to be considered when investigating the role of local P2P-peacebuilding initiatives.

While it proves difficult to address such inherent shortcoming of social science methodology, this study is aware that any information gained during the research process only reflects a brief moment in time, hence any inferences must be drawn with attention to the design’s theoretical and practical limitations. Individual replies cannot be understood to represent a universal reality in a particular country and location, nor necessarily a specific local organization. Instead, they mirror the subjective indentations of the individual participant at the time (here: April 2021). Especially working with local peacebuilding-activists this means an unavertable presence of personal and professional normative bias (Willis 2006). Lastly, due to data availability, there is a slight bias towards overrepresenting the Ghanian perspective.

Nonetheless, by carefully paying attention to issues of representation and external validity (De Vaus 2001) the findings can be appropriately situated within the boundaries of the research design. Notably, one can still identify broad patterns of conflict tissue and reconciliation efforts as well as the impacts of, and responses to, the pandemic (see *Background*). It is thus highly feasible to investigate the Covid-19-crisis’ impacts on local peacebuilding in a manner that is both thorough

and cross-cutting. Consequently, the study's internal validity and credibility remain rather high (ibid., Stewart-Withers et al. 2014).

Hence, by exploring, collecting, and comparing the rich in-depth data from mail-in interviews with people at the very heart of the issue, this research aspires to a comprehensive yet detailed understanding of the changes, challenges and opportunities the participants encountered within their respective contexts since the arrival of the pandemic.

6 Analysis

6.1 Context

6.1.1 Work environment

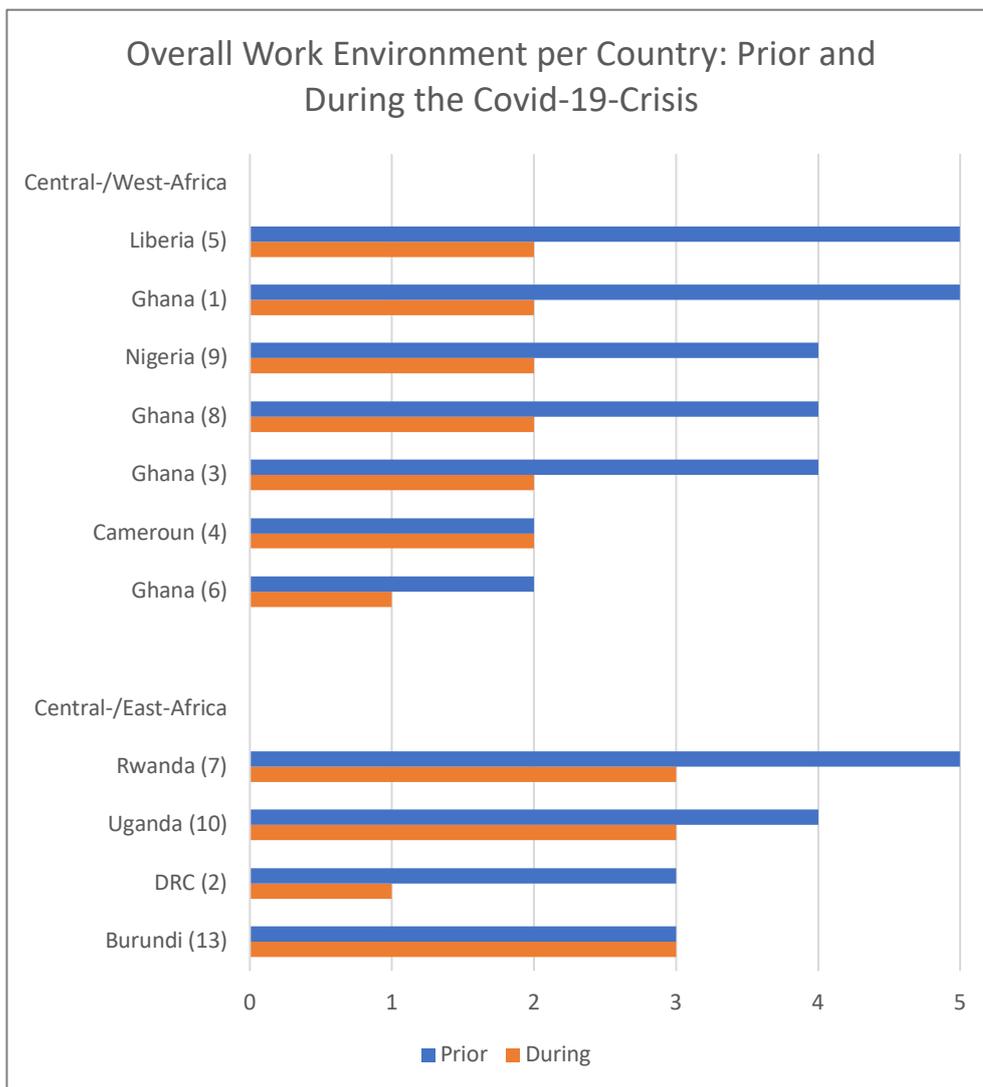


Figure 2: Overall work environment prior and during the Covid-19-crisis in descending order per region and country (as indicated by the participants); Scale 5 (very favorable) to 1 (very difficult). The numbers behind the countries indicate the individual replies.

Figure 2 shows a degradation of the general work environment as indicated by participants in 9 out of 13 accounts (indications missing for 11, 12). Only Cameroon (4) and Burundi (13) stayed equally 'difficult' or 'moderate'. This general pattern shows an overall decline from favorable or very favorable to difficult or extremely difficult in all countries, although stronger in Central- and East-Africa than in the (Central-)West.

6.1.2 Social and Private Dimensions

According to the participants, social distancing and PHMs are in place in every country, prohibiting larger to all gatherings. Additionally, mobility restrictions have been applied for cross-border travels at least during peak times of the Covid-19-outbreak. In some countries such as the DRC (2, 12), this also applies for movement across 'health zones'. Most places display closed or limited public services and institutions (2, 4, 8, 9). Due to these restrictions, 'people's social life has been deeply affected' (7).

Especially more crowded urban areas are reportedly affected the worst (3). As health care systems are increasingly under pressure, public hospitals become out crowded; poorer people have to resort to expensive private care (4). Some countries attempted to cushion the pandemic fallout on education employing tele-platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom, yet over a year into the pandemic, national statistics show extremely negative impacts on enrollment and graduation rates (4). As education is disrupted or changed to technological channels, many families cannot afford the changes (6). Alternative communication options are especially limited in rural areas (3, 6, 7, 9).

In all countries represented by the participants, people's private lives, too, have been deeply touched by the crisis' ramifications. While some people are simply 'bored at home' (1), others desperately seek out alternative ways for daily survival (ibid.). All participants describe compromises on human rights, mostly regarding freedom of movement and assembly, but also protection of vulnerable groups. Especially in the DRC, participants recount how the lack of support to families together with school closures for undetermined periods of time drive children into the webs of armed groups. Even if they return to the classroom, tensions and violent incidents between children, and children and teachers, spike. Women, desperate to support their families, sell themselves into sex work, divorce rates drastically increase. Particularly people living with a handicap suffer as financial support is withdrawn from their families. But also the elderly 'lose their decent human lives' (2).

6.1.3 Economic Dimension

All participants described the pandemic's heavy consequences for economic dynamics in their countries. As borders close, both exports and imports are severely shortened (4), provoking a scarcity of goods where market prizes and living costs skyrocket and financial flows startle (6, 8, 9). Apparently, Ghana (1, 3, 6, 8) and Nigeria (9) suffer most from the ripple effects through the global economic and international trading system (6), their previously 'free and flourishing economy' (9)

plunged into recession. As business and job markets collapse, bankruptcy and unemployment especially in the formal work sector add to the economic hardships many households already face (3, 4).

From a subsistence-perspective, poverty and hunger represent the pandemic's direst consequences (1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9). While some people take advantage of the situation selling medical equipment (1), others struggle 'to give two square meals to their families' (9). In some cases, such as indicated for Rwanda, rural areas have been less affected than urban settings since agricultural activities continued comparably uninterrupted (7).

Lastly, the pandemic exacerbated issues of bad governance, aggravating their fallout (1, 5, 6, 8, 9). Already a fundamental problem before, the contribution from Nigeria (9) stated that their situation significantly degraded during the health crisis: While political leaders embezzle relief donations for personal financial gains, less affluent families cannot afford to buy aid goods at high black-market prices, spreading the country's socio-economic and political divide. As the struggle for survival becomes ever more dire, so does crime (1, 5, 13).

6.1.4 Summary

The participant's responses confirm how the current crisis has provoked repercussions of unprecedented magnitude in every location. Their accounts illustrate and sometimes exceed what little data is available for each country at the time writing (see *Background*). Naturally, which areas have been affected the direst depends on the respective national context, not to mention the extent to which participants' expressions are shaped by their respective backgrounds and reflect their professional foci. Nonetheless, significant commonalities can be detected in all reports.

Such has the Covid-19-crisis deepened pre-existing socio-economic divides in all countries. This effect was especially mentioned by those with a violent history and deeply rooted social inequalities (compare with Kelman 1999) such as Rwanda (7, 11), further Cameroon (4), the DRC (2), Ghana (1, 3, 6, 8), Nigeria (9) and Uganda (10).

In sum, the participant's personal narratives convey a multifaceted yet thorough account of the contemporary situations in several West- and Central- to East-African countries. Taking into consideration the contemporary work environment of the represented organizations helps to contextualize the findings and analyze them in a nuanced manner attentive to both commonalities as well as particularities of each report.

6.2 Changes and Challenges: The Impacts of Covid-19 on Local Associative Peacebuilding Initiatives

6.2.1 Horizontal Relationships

Horizontal relationships between individual actors actively and passively involved in the reconciliation process have been identified as key element of local associative peacebuilding efforts. Through the interviews, the study has gathered rich input on how the Covid-19-crisis has affected horizontal relationships in this regard, firstly investigating how peacebuilders' engagement with their beneficiaries has been altered and secondly how the ways people from the community connect, meet and exchange have been touched over the past months.

6.2.1.1 Changes in Peacebuilding Engagement

Except for NDH-Cameroun (4), all participants reported significant changes how they engage with individuals and groups from their communities and beyond. Especially universal PHMs, notably the social distancing and mobility restrictions, greatly affected their *modus operandi*. WYO from Nigeria (9) described the pandemic as 'disaster to the organization unable to function properly due to Covid-19'. As donor priorities shift to the fight of Covid-19, many organizations struggle to adjust their projects and keep up their work (1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11; compare with CPS 2020). Most organizations work with limited staff presence or shifted entirely to home office. For some, their ordinary workday was reduced from eight hours at the office to three hours at home causing additional financial shortcomings (5). Field activities have become more costly and difficult to implement; organization personnel and volunteers are now unable to engage with communities for instance through their regular home visits (5, 6, 11). Meetings have been entirely upended (6) or attendance strictly limited; most interactions rely on phone calls and text messages, radio, television and online platforms (4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13).

Still, the use of such alternative communication tools has been of limited success: On the one hand, they represent essential means for local peacebuilders to stay in touch with their audience. Some, especially social media applications, have been used already prior to the pandemic, providing a powerful tool for social interactions and exchange (4). Nevertheless, virtual meetings – among peacebuilders themselves, and with their beneficiaries – naturally feature several functional and emotional shortcomings: 'People are not able to fully air their views, shortage of time, network disturbances, etc.' (13). Ultimately, technological devices cannot replace physical meetings and direct P2P-exchange since 'peacebuilding is interactions' (11). The financial aspect of cellular data and internet access represent another considerable obstacle echoed by most participants (2, 6, 10, 12). Due to this lack of access to technological communication devices, most have little alternatives to direct P2P-exchanges to stay in touch (7).

The severeness of these drawbacks depends on case-specific circumstances. In the Rwandan context, peacebuilding mainly focuses on social healing and cohesion through group therapy and community dialogue (7). Since such activities are now

prohibited in presence, they have become extremely challenging to realize. Despite NURC's (7) efforts to use radio and television instead, such initiatives were of limited success. Likewise, partner organizations trying out 'online listening to help those living trauma' (7) experienced unsatisfying outcomes. Commemorating the 1994-genocide online the second consecutive year, virtual interactions prove insufficient to overcome the survivors' deeply rooted pain and sorrow. Instead, isolation and loneliness in home confinement only deepen their trauma (11). Yet following Miall et al. (2016), psycho-social healing constitutes a central element of any lasting peacebuilding effort.

6.2.1.2 *Impacts on P2P-Connections*

Apart from the implications for local peacebuilders' work and community engagement, the pandemic significantly altered the ways individual people connect, meet and exchange. Again, the scope and effect of the association- and mobility-restrictions on P2P-connections varies greatly between the communities, yet seemingly for different reasons. Especially where PHMs are not much observed and people's social lives continue relatively uninterrupted such as indicated by NDH-Cameroun (4), daily P2P-exchanges have been but little affected (4). Similarly, the data indicates that in the DRC (2), but also in Ghana (1, 3, 6) and Nigeria (9), lots of people particularly in rural areas are unable to observe PHMs anyways. Thus P2P-exchanges have only been moderately affected. Even some positive turns can be observed as the more affluent organize cleaning utensils and distribute them at gatherings and in public spaces (2). Meanwhile, ignorance, loss of fear for infection and defiance of authorities were reported particularly from Ghana (1) where cases have consistently declined since February (Ghana Health Service 05/21). 'The concept is if the law makers break their own law, then we shall as well, forgetting it is to our own disadvantage' (1).

Nonetheless, most participants emphasized the dramatic toll months of social distancing and fear of the 'invisible' virus have taken not only on people's physical abilities but also their mental openness to meet and connect. Especially urban areas are more sensitive and cautious compared to rural areas (6) which are often less affected by the disease but also receive much less attention (3, 9): 'Almost all cases reported are from the cities. To some, the virus is a myth.' (3). As the pandemic's consequences transcend every aspect of community life, conventional modes of P2P-exchange as trivial as chatting with a neighbor become difficult (5, 7). 'Africans are people with a lot of cultures. We like to socialize in many ways (...) but one can no longer do that, no shaking of hands and sharing of common meals' (6). 'Quarantine and isolation have stopped some of the ceremonies (such as weddings, burials, donations) which constitute a strong tie of relationship in society' (6, also 13). Consequently, 'people don't mingle anymore' (6), they are reluctant to partake in social activities even outdoors.

Both the public restrictions and personal fear of transmitting the virus thus significantly lower people's openness and willingness to exchange with one another (5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13). Furthermore, official statements and WHO-recommendations demonizing traditional ways of socializing, promoting distrust and suspicion among individuals (6). As one participant from Ghana states, the people's perception of the Other has been severely altered. For example, 'riding in a public transport (...) you have a normal flu, people see you differently, if you are not fortunate and sneeze, you should get ready to fight the multitude' (1).

Hence uncertainty and fear of the unknown fuel social tensions, and previously minor incidents quickly escalate. Besides, WYO (9) mentioned that, albeit the pandemic's consequences are very present in the minds of Nigerians, there is a great caveat between their theoretical knowledge and practical reality where the rich capture all aid material and relief funds while the poor receive none. This 'mental gap' reflecting pre-existing socio-economic inequalities drives individuals from different backgrounds further apart.

Overall, horizontal relationships relying on direct social interactions such as facilitated by local associative peacebuilding initiatives have been gravely affected by the direct and indirect ramifications of the Covid-19-crisis. Thus, it has become 'very challenging to promote social cohesion in a social distancing context' (7). Technological substitutes to engage with community members yielded limited outcomes due to their functional and inherent drawbacks. Despite constant fear of endangering others through their activities, local peacebuilders continue to highlight 'the positive effect of face-to-face meetings when it comes to peace negotiation.' (8).

Lastly, many peacebuilders do not only remark on the significant impediments to directly engage people from and between communities. They also point to the pandemic's very real implications on both 'ordinary people's' physical abilities and psychological aptness to connect with each other. Together, these developments significantly infringe upon social relationships based on mutual understanding, respect and trust (8).

6.2.2 Reciprocal Cooperations

Diverse and reciprocal cooperation between the different actors involved in the peace process represents a focal feature of associative peacebuilding efforts (Galtung 1976a). Through exploring how people's abilities and openness to cooperate have been affected by the pandemic, this research aims to gain deeper insights how its fallout touches reciprocal exchanges between civic stakeholders, and what implications this yields for local structures of positive peace. The overall picture conveyed by the participants shows mixed impacts in this regard: In some cases, the Covid-19-restrictions are perceived as 'just another rule' to be observed, seemingly without deeper implications for symbiotic exchanges among community members (1, 4). However, all participants stated the main challenge for working with their beneficiaries resulted from said restrictions on social gatherings and mobility. Besides, people have become more enclosed in their own physical but also head space (3, 4, 5). The pandemic restrictions do not only curb direct 'bilateral' contact essential to establish and maintain egalitarian relationships between individuals. It also makes it incredibly harder for people to convene for cooperative activities of any kind.

6.2.2.1 *Implications for Organizational Cooperation*

Especially organizations working with counterparts in neighboring countries have been severely affected by travel restrictions hamstringing their abilities to meet and coordinate (1, 13). Furthermore, as GloPag from Ghana (1) indicated, their partner organizations were struck equally or worse, levelling most joint

programs. Consequently, reciprocal work arrangements have become much more difficult to initiate, organize, facilitate.

Most local stakeholders perceive diverse and mutually beneficial connections as vital elements of their peacebuilding engagements at a glocal level. Nonetheless, the pandemic fallout has had very real implications for existing partnerships, highlighting the virtues of greater flexibility but also more independence at the expense of multifaceted collaborations. Such did GloPag (1) perceive the crisis as opportunity to search for alternative programs, enhancing timeliness, diversity and autonomy of former cooperative activities.

Contrarily, some organizations expressed the renewed urgency to find humanitarian organizations and international donors to accompany local peacebuilders in their work. Here, the search for financial support gains an additional dimension where third-party actors are welcomed not only as lenders but as partners in a joint pursuit for peace and development (1, 2, 13). It confirms that local P2P-initiatives cannot be a stand-alone approach but prove most feasible when applied in tandem with multidimensional efforts between and across different stakeholders (Lederach 1998).

6.2.2.2 Impacts on P2P-Cooperation

Symbiotic relationships – the ‘negotiation of mutual isolation’ (Galtung 1976a, 300) – suffer when material inequalities are exacerbated, for instance through prolonged periods of crisis. Now isolation constitutes the key element of most PHMs. As APADEC (2) argued, the border closures between the DRC and its neighboring states interrupted cross-border small-commerce where people would usually engage in micro-economic cooperations. Hence apart from its material implications, this move upends very real avenues of cooperation.

The pandemic’s economic fallout in conjunction with increased social anxiety makes people close down, ‘keeping the little they can make to themselves’ (6). Consequently, symbiotic relationships have been significantly weakened.

As illustrated above, notwithstanding formal restraints, the constant fear of transmitting the air-borne ‘invisible’ disease makes people both more careful but also more uncomfortable around each other (5, 6). The interruption of basic public and social services (2, 4, 9), in addition to lack of communication and information, was directly linked to fueled suspicion, social anxiety and ‘mental distancing’ (4, 5). While this degrades horizontal relationships, it also makes it much harder to engage community members in cooperative projects. Again, the scope of this problematic depends on the respective setting. Although information flows tend to be sounder in more populated and connected urban areas, the erosion of social trust, too, seems to be a graver problem in urban zones compared to rural communities (3). Notwithstanding network connection issues in most rural settings, the less affected a community, the easier it proves for people to work together particularly through direct P2P-encounters (3, 4, 7).

In the Nigerian context, faith was brought up as strong social glue contributing to people’s sustained interest and willingness to cooperate (9). However, all participants echo the negative effect of social distancing on people’s abilities and openness to entertain diverse reciprocal activities: While some ‘cooperat(e) doing very well’ (6), most people ‘keep their problems to themselves (...) you need to ‘catch’ them to engage’ (ibid.). Since people are afraid to go out and meet, facilitating any kind of meaningful cooperation – by themselves or through local

peacebuilders – becomes difficult. Hence, rich, mutually beneficial cooperation appears to be closely tied to subjective feelings of safety and trust among community members. As people are less willing to cooperate, they are more willing to pursue their aims by force (13).

As discussed in the theoretical section, horizontal relationships and reciprocal cooperation are highly interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Meanwhile, the erosion of integrative ties and cooperative activities between members of the community add to social unrest and instability, adversely affecting locally embedded infrastructures of peace (Galtung 1976a). Against this background, it appears even more essential to directly, physically, engage with all stakeholders in order to promote cooperative activities. For local activists, direct P2P-contact still constitutes the single most effective medium for such endeavors.

6.2.3 Democratic Participation

Following Galtung's framework, the just and inclusive distribution of information and communication across all channels constitutes an essential democratic property of any comprehensive peacebuilding effort. Habermas complements this view in characterizing public discourse and communicative action as both the expression of, and enabling moments for, democratic participation. Together, they help understand which implications the pandemic's consequences yield not only for people's social relationships and reciprocal exchanges, but for their active political participation within communal to regional systems. The interviews focused on the changes peacebuilders noticed in performing public advocacy, as well as the crisis' impacts on their ability to mobilize people for a joint cause. Most participants characterized mobilization of scope as main challenge due to mobility, assembly and communication hindrances. Meanwhile, they noted little to moderate changes in their abilities to perform public advocacy (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13).

6.2.3.1 Democratic Dialogue

As one participant from Liberia (5) stated, shifting most communication to the virtual space erodes social networks while distancing gains traction (4). Furthermore, people become crucially dependent on access to technological devices, network connection and data, which are often distributed unequally along geographic, socio-economic and demographic lines (2, 3, 6, 7, 9). This also implies that official channels become central to the distribution of information since traditional, informal ways of dissemination are now severely limited. These dynamics tilt the scales of 'entropic' (democratic) communication patterns (Galtung 1976a).

Here, issues of bad governance gain another dimension going beyond its political and economic consequences (see *Background*): Especially Ghana (1, 3, 6, 8) and Nigeria (9) illustrated how people become increasingly biased and hesitant concerning government information even as most lack sufficient access to various, reliable alternatives. But also in Liberia (5) and Uganda (10) where dawning elections hike up the political stakes of the crisis, 'the risks of misinformation (buttressing narrow political motives) have the potential to spike violence and public unrest' (5). According to WYO (9), their biggest challenge in Nigeria is to

provide guidance and foster confidence within their communities against popular distrust in the government and the increasing spread of biased and false information. Here, we can observe one of the main struggles of civil society organizations engaging in contests over meaning and representation (Gamson 1992).

The data indicates that the PHMs deployed from ‘above’ in conjunction with the lack of quality information through formal channels fuel uncertainty and distrust among the general population. Like that, they significantly compound the space and means for democratic discourse from ‘below’. Thus, mechanisms facilitating mutual responsiveness between different factions – within and beyond the community – are severely compromised (Habermas 1971).

Similarly, Burundi-based MI-RPD (13) expressed how the ban on public gatherings to exchange, collect and disseminate information infringes upon their capabilities to convey the views, opinions and needs of the less affluent to the better served. Diminished dialogue hence exacerbates the disconnect between different groups organized in a community, widening the crevice between the have and have nots. Furthermore, GloPag (3) asserted that traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in Ghana typically rely, especially in smaller communities, on culturally embedded procedures of deliberation and discourse facilitated either by the chief or through a gathering. With assemblies taking place less easily and frequently now, ‘lots of issues go unresolved’ (3). Likewise in Rwanda with its history of deeply entrenched and extremely violent conflicts, the closure of therapy groups means that issues of trauma remain undiscussed and unresolved. Unrelentingly building up, they jeopardize mutual understanding and compassion among community members (7). Together, these dynamics erode integrative ties further while increasing social tensions that threaten local peace, justice and stability.

6.2.3.2 *Popular Mobilization*

Reading the interviews, it becomes clear that most participants do not discriminate between information, exchange and mobilization but rather perceive each as engrained in an organic communication process. They indicate that peacebuilding initiatives fostering a diverse and inclusive discourse do not only constitute an essential expression of democratic participation but carry significant transformative value when translated into popular mobilization.

However, since the Covid-19-crisis deliberately disrupted communication mechanisms, popular ‘communicative’ action has been critically restrained. This applies to peacebuilders themselves whose capacities to exchange and moreover to organize joint activities have been hindered by the restrictions on staff in office, unforeseen expanses and want for funding (2, 6, 10, 12). Besides, while mobilization far and sundry remains extremely important for local organizations to promote their cause (3, 6), the pandemics’ reverberations were described as demoralizing for any form of civic mobilization (6, 9). Where limited action is possible, the need to observe PHMs, aggravated financial strain and hesitancy of participants curbs the scope and impact of mobilization efforts (2, 5, 6 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13). Several organizations note that they or their partners had run some small-scale events yet at limited success (2, 6, 7).

The data implies that digital formats providing a virtual space for deliberation and negotiation in absence of physical public space can help facilitate a form of democratic dialogue in order to ‘keep the conversation going’. A few participants

explicitly mentioned positive effects of greater reach as more people turn to social media to both inform and express themselves (3, 4). Nonetheless, all participating peacebuilders agree that physical P2P-contact still proves vital for their communication, information dissemination and coordination. Therefore, communicative action deriving from digital discourse seems limited.

In sum, the pandemic's primary and secondary repercussions have significantly compromised people's abilities to engage in a democratic dialogue as 'social communication has come to a halt' (9). Facilitating an inclusive, diverse popular discourse during times of social distancing and mobility freeze and translating it into a joint course of action thus represents the biggest challenge for most participants.

6.3 Opportunities: Covid-19, A Wake-up Call?

For the pandemic has significantly shaken people's conventional roads and rules of conduct (7), it has also opened up new avenues of engagement, 'broadening the horizon' of many involved in local associative peacebuilding (1). Indeed, some participants remarked on the positive aspects of this crisis as a 'wake-up call' (7), namely the need but also opportunity to discover new modes of commitment and actively diversify their strategies, for example by reaching a larger audience via digital means and expanding both offline and online information and education campaigns (3, 4, 6, 7). Conclusively, the pandemic encouraged a positive transformative effect for associative P2P-peacebuilding projects. Although grassroots-initiatives are commonly more flexible than larger and institutionalized approaches, even they experience the need to reorganize and adjust their conventional work modes: 'It is no longer a one-plan approach to engagement. The community dictates the method of engagement' (3).

Universally speaking, the Covid-19-crisis has highlighted the 'cracks in our system' (ibid.) previously overlooked. Therefore, the pandemic might still work as catalyzer for structural change by uncovering systemic weaknesses and uniting people to fight for their cause. Strong integrative ties fostered by associative peacebuilding initiatives, however, will prove essential to lower social-political tensions and prevent such transformations from provoking a radical backlash. For an extended discussion on the significance and limitations of local associative peacebuilding during the Covid-19-crisis for democratic procedure, see *appendix 3*.

6.4 Research Summary

This research explored the impacts of the Covid-19-crisis on civic peacebuilding initiatives in different African countries. Based on the literature, three key qualities of local associative peacebuilding had been identified: Horizontal relationships, reciprocal cooperation and democratic discourse and action.

Since local peacebuilding largely relies on direct P2P-contact to foster integrative social ties and joint activities providing a common yet diversified platform for popular exchange and mobilization, exactly these modes of engagement have been undermined by the primary and secondary repercussions of the PHMs all countries employed to contain the virus. Prohibiting 'ordinary people' from associating and working together, they hence disturb horizontal relationships and hamstring reciprocal cooperation. Most importantly, this unravels the fabric of pre-existing integrative ties while economic inequalities rise and social injustices strike deeper.

During this time, local associative peacebuilding suffers from multiple additional drawbacks whose scope and urgency depend on country- and organization-specific circumstances. Among others, these are: Reduced financial support by government agencies, donors and international partner organizations, biased media attention towards the socio-economically and geographically better served, lack of quality information and education together with the exploitation of the crisis for narrow political agendas. Through their personal accounts, the participants have vividly illustrated recent developments and explicitly expressed concerns regarding the negative impacts on trauma processing, community dialogue and social cohesion, conflict resolution and political stability in their local environments.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Discussion and Outlook: Associative Peacebuilding, Democratic Participation and Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development relies on a multitude of components, most of which we still lack a comprehensive understanding when it comes to their multiple dimensions and complex linkages to other phenomena of the social world. Over the past decades, simplistic and streamlined strategies to deliver development have been gradually abandoned for more holistic, culturally sensitive and locally integrated approaches. Exploring the repercussions of the Covid-19-crisis for associative P2P-peacebuilding initiatives in different African countries has uncovered some of the changes and challenges, but also opportunities, civic engagement for conflict transformation and reconciliation currently faces. The findings highlight how the uneven distribution of basic public services, technological infrastructure, media attention and government support contribute to civic unrest, social cleavages and political disenchantment. Meanwhile, local peacebuilding initiatives help mediate tensions, promote a vivid exchange and foster confidence among community members towards greater stability and inclusiveness.

The pandemic might represent a wake-up call for structural change on multiple levels. Change, however, comes at the risk to break loose conflicts escalating in violence. Especially ‘fragile’ countries lacking diversified economies, robust institutions, and inclusive political systems (HLP 2014) profit from said virtues fostered by associative peacebuilding. Like that, centrifugal forces may be concentrated towards a common objective attentive to the needs and aspirations not only of the most powerful but equally of the most vulnerable stakeholders.

Meanwhile, whether local organization’s circumstantial turn inwards will gain traction at the expense of a pluralistic discourse will crucially depend on the measures and priorities applied by the international community, including governments, donors and corporations, to alleviate the pandemic’s long-term collateral. Developing tailored responses to context-specific problematics considering historical conflict patterns, institutional capacities and local means cannot fall to one set of actors alone.

This multiple case study has attempted to sketch out an understanding of the triple nexus between peace, democracy and development grounded in first-hand accounts from a diverse representation of local stakeholders. It has highlighted similarities and pointed to significant differences while aiming to stay true to each participants’ individual experiences. Further research is tasked with the in-depth investigation how case- and country-specific conditions alter the pandemic’s repercussions for particular work environments and people’s social, economic and

political realities. The findings illustrate the far-reaching and multifaceted nature of the crisis' ramifications going well beyond a sheer health threat. Consequently, the long-term implications of this unprecedented situation on conflict resolution mechanisms and democratic procedure for sustainable development will constitute vital research avenues for years to come.

This research has covered much ground regarding the contemporary challenges local associative peacebuilding faces and reflected on their implications for sustainable development processes. Now the conversation needs to focus on peacebuilder's innovative responses to address these hindrances. Ways to support structural change 'from below' working towards greater democratic sharing across all societal factions without adding to the endemic socio-political fragility prevalent in most communities need to be explored more into detail. Hence, moving towards the 16th SDG firstly presupposes departing from a checkerboard-approach to development.

In French, there is no equivalent to 'peacebuilding' other than *réconciliation*. Effective and resilient political settlements rely on the increasing inclusion and lasting reconciliation of contenting groups. Even as the Covid-19-crisis has severely touched every dimension of people's economic, social and private lives, associative peacebuilding initiatives make an invaluable contribution to generate just, inclusive, and resilient development processes.

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Appendix 1

Theoretical Linkage: Associative Peacebuilding, Democracy and Development

Galtung (1976a) states the ultimate goal of all peacebuilding efforts should be to integrate the ‘mechanisms that peace is based on into the structure and be present there as a reservoir for the system itself to draw upon’ (p. 298). Here, democratic systems building upon fundamental values of ‘equal political rights and civil liberties’ (Burnell et Rakner 2014, 220) appear especially feasible since they nurture mechanisms to accommodate tensions such as disputes over power and wealth distribution, offering alternatives to conflict in critical situations for instance through institutionalized resolution procedures.

Participatory theories of democracy place a high premium on the ‘development of reciprocal relationships of trust between individuals’ (Grugel 2002, 23). Contrary to Schumpeterian conceptualization of democracy, participation instead of representation becomes the defining feature of a resilient and substantive democracy (ibid.). This central importance of ‘freedom and activism’ (Grugel 2002, 23) illustrates the vital role civic engagement plays for increasing democratic quality through inclusion. By necessity it entails the mediation and accommodation of central social and economic inequalities (Philips 1999).

Likewise, the High Level Panel on Fragile States (2014) notes that ‘political settlements should be increasingly inclusive, challenging old patterns of dominance and exclusion’ (p. 17) in order to incorporate contenting groups into the political process, establish a mutually responsive relationship between the government and its citizens, and prevent from further disruptions (ibid.). Conflict resolution mechanisms cannot be imposed from above or induced from outside but will only be sustainable when adopted by local actors, which is more likely when they are actively involved in the process (Lederach 1998).

Nonetheless, without further diving into distinct theoretical schools, they all tend to agree that for reconciliatory political settlements to be effective and lasting, they need to involve actors from all tracks. Governments and private citizens, professionals and activists, businesses, NGOs, religious institutions and media (Diamond et McDonald 1996, Lederach 1998, Miall et al. 2016). This view correlates with ‘entropy’ (democracy) as second condition of associative peace after Galtung (1976a), reflected in the findings of this study.

Appendix 2

Invitation and Interview Guide

Survey: Impacts of the Covid19-pandemic on Local Peacebuilding Initiatives in Africa

Introduction

Hey!

My name is Pauline and perhaps you have already met me while I was working with the **International Peace Bureau (IPB)** in Berlin this Spring. Currently, I am also part of the Steering group of the (IPB) Youth Network.

Apart from that, I study International Development at **Lunds University in Sweden**.

Inspired by the intense exchange between the IPB and our African friends and colleagues over the past months, I have decided to focus my thesis paper on the **'Impacts of the Covid19-crisis on local peacebuilding efforts in Africa'**.

To this end, I prepared some questions, and I would be most grateful if you would take a **few minutes to share your personal experience and insights**.

While the phrasing of the questions is rather straight forward, feel free to expand on them if you feel like they are missing an important point. The objective is to develop a picture of the situation that is as **comprehensive** as possible, but still focused on the **impacts of the pandemic on your, and your organization's work, on local to regional peacebuilding initiatives**.

Practicalities

The survey is written in English and in *French*, with the exact same meaning. Please read the seven questions carefully and **reply directly below each, starting at the bullet point** (the formatting will necessarily change a bit), but feel free to continue your answers after the final question should you need more space.

The survey is completely **voluntary**, and replies will be **fully anonymized**. In case you would like your name to be mentioned in the final output of the study, however, you are welcome to indicate it at the end of the survey.

Finally, as I am trying to gather as much input as possible, please **consider forwarding this to friends and colleagues** working on local peacebuilding.

Please return the survey to my mail address pauline.auer@gmail.com latest on **Friday, 23rd of April 2021**. Also, feel free to come back to me should there be any open questions or remarks!

Thank you in advance for your time and efforts!!

Warmly,

Pauline

Pauline Auer

Bachelor's Student of International Development Studies, Lund University, Sweden

Enquête : Les Impacts de la pandémie Covid19 sur les initiatives pour la réconciliation locale en Afrique

Introduction personnelle

Bonjour !

*Je m'appelle Pauline et peut-être tu m'as rencontré déjà alors que j'ai travaillé chez le **Bureau International de la Paix (IPB)** à Berlin ce printemps. De plus, je fais partie au comité pilote du réseau des jeunes de l'IPB. A part de cela, je fais mes études au Développement international à **l'université de Lund en Suède**. Inspirée par l'échange intense entre l'IPB et nos amis et collègues Africains au cours des mois passés, j'ai choisi de concentrer ma thèse de bachelier (licence) aux **'Impacts de la crise Covid19 aux efforts locaux de réconciliation en Afrique'**.*

*C'est la raison pour laquelle j'ai préparé des questions et j'étais extrêmement reconnaissant si tu auras **quelques minutes** pour **partager vos expériences et connaissances personnelles**.*

*Pendant que la formulation des questions est relativement directe, veuillez sentir libre d'étendre vos réponses si vous avez l'impression qu'elles manquent un point essentiel. L'objectif est de développer une image de la situation la plus **compréhensive** que possible, quoique toujours concentrée aux **impacts de la pandémie sur ton, et le travail de ton organisation, aux initiatives de réconciliation locale**.*

Détails pratiques

*L'enquête est écrite en Anglais bien qu'en Français avec l'exacte même sens des deux. Veuillez lire les sept questions attentivement et **répondre directement dessous chaque question, commençant à la puce** (même si le format changera un peu par nécessité), mais n'hésitez pas à continuer après la question finale si vous avez besoin de plus d'espace.*

*L'enquête est entièrement **volontaire** et les réponses auront **complètement dépersonnalisés**. Dans le cas où vous aimerez que votre nom soit mentionné au résultat final de la recherche, cependant, indiquez-le à la fin de l'enquête, s'il vous plaît.*

*Enfin, car j'essaie de collecter le plus d'entrées que possible, veuillez considérer à **transmettre cela à vos amis et collègues** travaillant au secteur de réconciliation locale. Retournez cette enquête à mon adresse email pauline.auer@gmail.com **Vendredi, le 23ème Avril 2021** au plus tard, s'il vous plaît. En outre, n'hésitez pas de m'envoyer un message quand il y a subsisté des questions ouvertes !*

Merci bien en avance pour votre temps et vos efforts !!

Cordialement,

Pauline

Pauline Auer

Étudiante de licence de Développement International, Université de Lund, Suède

Survey/Enquête

- i. Please state the **country/region** where you/your organization is active:
Indique le pays/la région où tu/ton organisation es.t actif.ve?

- ii. How would you describe your/your organization's **local work environment**, in general, on a scale from **1 (very difficult) to 5 (very favorable)**?
Comment est-ce que tu décrirais l'environnement local de travail pour toi/ton organisation, en général, à une gamme de 1 (très difficile) à 5 (très favorable) ?
 - **Prior to the pandemic/Avant la pandémie:**
 - **Now/During the pandemic/Maintenant/Pendant la pandémie:**

Context: Covid19-pandemic in Africa/**Contexte:** Pandémie de Covid19 en Afrique

1. Please give a **brief overview of the current situation** in your country or region and how the pandemic has impacted the **people's social, economic and private lives**:
Donne un bref aperçu de la situation dans ton pays ou ta région et comment la pandémie a affectée la vie sociale, économique et privée des gens :

Impacts of Covid19-pandemic on Local Peacebuilding/Impacts de la pandémie Covid19 sur la réconciliation locale

2. What **changes** in your peacebuilding work have you noticed since the start of the pandemic, especially regarding the ways to **engage with individuals or groups** and doing **public advocacy**?
Quels changes as-tu noté.e dès que le début de la pandémie, particulièrement en ce qui concerne les manières d'engager avec des individu.e.s ou groups et faire des plaidoyers publiques ?

3. How have the consequences of the pandemic affected the **way the people** in your community or region **connect (meet, exchange) with each other**? Has it become, for instance, easier, harder, remained equal, and why?
Comment ont les conséquences de la pandémie affectées les façons que les gens dans ta commune ou région connectent (se rencontrent, échangent) entre eux ?

4. How have the impacts of Covid19 affected the people's **abilities and openness to cooperate** with one another?
*Comment ont les impacts de Covid19 affectés **les capacités et la disponibilité des gens de coopérer** avec l'un l'autre ?*

5. What impacts does the pandemic have on **your** (individual/organization's) **ability to publicly express** yourself and to **mobilize** other people?
*La pandémie, elle a quelles conséquences sur **tes capacités** (individuelles/de l'organisation) **de t'exprimer en public et mobiliser** d'autres personnes ?*

Outlook: Challenges and Chances through the pandemic/**Perspective:** Des défis et des chances à travers de la pandémie

6. What are **the biggest challenges for local peacebuilding** in your area at the time? Have there been any **opportunities**?
*Quels sont **les défis les plus considérables pour la réconciliation locale** dans ta zone au moment ? Est-ce qu'il y avait des **chances** ?*

7. Are there any **further points** you would like to make?
*Y'a t'il quelques **points de plus** que tu aimerais mentionner ?*

Thank you so much for your help!

Take care,

Je te remercie pour ton aide!

Sois prudent,

Pauline

Lund, 10/04/21

→ **If needed:** Additional space/*Si nécessaire: Espace supplémentaire :*

Sampling and Participants

Table 1: Overview of participant's organizations, organization's main occupations and sphere of influence

Attributed number	Organization's acronym	Full name	Main occupations	Sphere of action
(1, 3, 6, 8)	GloPag	Global Peace Association of Ghana	Peace, Community development	Ghana
(2)	APADEC	Association d'actions de paix et de développement communautaire	Peace, Community development, Vulnerable groups	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
(4)	NDH-Cameroon	Nouveaux Droits de l'Homme	Human rights, peace, justice	Cameroon
(5)	4Kids International	For Kids International	Youth education + empowerment, Peace, Community development	Liberia
(7)	NURC	National Unity and Reconciliation Commission	Reconciliation, Social trust + cohesion	Rwanda
(9)	WYPO	World Youth Peace Organization	Peace, Human dignity, security	Nigeria
(10)	ALARM	African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries	Violent + Religious conflicts, Reconciliation, Justice	Uganda
(11)	GER	Global Initiative for Environment and Reconciliation	Post-conflict community support, reconciliation, Environmental protection	Rwanda
(12)	SIDH DRC	Service International Des Droits de l'Homme	Human rights, Peace, Justice	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
(13)	MI-RPD	Mechanism of Search for Peace and Development Initiative	Peace, Development	Burundi + East-African countries

Data Analysis

Table 2: Coding Framework

	Horizontal relationships	Cross-actor cooperation	Democratic participation	Other: xx
2. Changes: Engagement + advocacy	xx	xx		
3. Way people connect	xx			
4. Abilities + openness to cooperate		xx		
5. Public expression + mobilization			xx	
6. Challenges	xx	xx	xx	
6. Opportunities	xx	xx	xx	
7. Further	xx	xx	xx	

Positionality

Most pitfalls regarding power dynamics between ‘researcher and researched’ but also age and gender could be avoided due to previously established working relationships and the prevalence of a shared set of values and interests. The relatively low average age of the group and strong heterogeneity in terms of nationality, background and gender certainly contributed further. The interview format also responds to these considerations, the slightly detached webspace providing a more neutral meeting ground than face-to-face interviews allow for.

Translating the replies written in French presented its own challenges. It followed the premise that ‘translation is more than a technical exercise; it is also a social relationship involving power, status and the imperfect mediation of cultures’ (Bujra 2006, 172). Still, being the person transcribing both the questions and replies, I paid careful attention capture their full scope and stay true to the original meaning. Overall, the bilingual concept made participation more open and inclusive, countering common research bias of access and communication (Chambers 1981) while acknowledging participants’ nationally distinct historical trajectories and individual work environments. Although it remains ultimately impossible to ‘completely control the power relations in which (me, the participants, and their various audiences) are differently embedded’ (Cupples et Kindon 2014, 250), this careful yet pragmatic degree of self-reflection conveyed a sense of purpose and positionality that greatly helped to navigate the research process.

Appendix 3

Discussion: Associative Peacebuilding and Democratic Participation

Albeit any causal inferences derived from this study on the systemic impacts of the Covid-19-crisis exceed the design and scope of this research, it is possible to draw some particular conclusions regarding the assignment and meaning of democratic participation for positive peace and by extension for local to regional sustainable development processes. The findings highlight how the uneven distribution of basic public services, technological infrastructure, media attention and government support contribute to civic unrest, social cleavages and political disenchantment. Local civic engagement thus plays a vital role to mediate and accommodate social and economic inequalities through ever greater inclusiveness.

Moreover, an unbiased, cohesive overview promoted by local peacebuilders – as opposed to politician’s statements often perceived as heavily skewed towards their own cause by the general population – seem to strongly contribute to greater safety and stability in the community. Here, widespread education occupies a central position as essential resource for people to thoroughly understand the disease’s severeness and prevention strategies. Following the participants’ accounts, the lack of universal and quality education in lots of settings across all represented countries demonstrates how this acute gap in people’s skill set critically limits their abilities to adopt to the quickly changing circumstances.

‘People can find each other on so many bases’ (Galtung 1976a, 300). Albeit unable to replace physical P2P-contact, advancing access to technology plays a vital role not only for P2P-peacebuilding initiatives but for the education, information, social connection and democratic participation of millions of people, urban or remote, children or adults, influential or vulnerable.

While this improves popular oversight and legitimacy of political leaders, it also benefits mutual responsiveness between the factions (Habermas 1971, Orjuela 2005). With citizen’s ‘freedom of activism’ (Grugel 2002, 23) strongly restrained, the mismatch between formal health guidelines and people’s capabilities to adhere to them points to problems of knowledge transfer and translation (see Lederach 1998, Saunders 2001). Thus, albeit democratic procedure inevitably means to constantly negotiate tradeoffs between different stakeholders’ means and objectives (see Kriesberg 2001), this proves vital to protect people's lives. Consequently, a vivid discourse and popular mobilization still matter to ‘ordinary people’ despite and especially during such times of crisis.