Rethinking Contemporary Peacebuilding

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Rethinking Contemporary Peacebuilding: Bologna Peacebuilding Forum 2026

The persistence of peacebuilding forums and international mediation conferences reveals the irony within the present international system: while peace is one of the most desirable political ideals of humanity, it remains one of the most elusive. With that in mind, from 6-8 May, we attended the Bologna Peacebuilding Forum in Bologna, Italy, organized by the Agency for Peacebuilding. This event brought together not only well-known professionals in the field from different organizations, but also aspirational

students to critically reflect on the future of peacebuilding and mediation processes.

Overall, the framing point of the whole event was how to make peace-making processes more effective, and the reconsideration of our understanding of peace and its specific "building" in modern realities, where geopolitical tensions persist. It was stressed by experts that currently our perception of peacemaking and peacebuilding is outdated not only in procedural terms, but also from a linguistic point of view. Similar to greenwashing, justifying superficial initiatives framed as environmentally sustainable, the field of peace is dominated by superficial, fast-to-make peace deals, which are in the long run not really responsive to the needs of local communities. Moreover, peace is defined as a tool of power-sharing where even humanitarian support is a subject of bargaining. Peace is still perceived through the lens of liberal democracy and stigma towards actors that are not in line with Western values, while with the given increase in the variety of agents, comprehensive work with even excluded players from the common agenda is necessary. In more detail, to move closer to desired sustainable conflict resolution, there is a need to consider the following elements:

Inclusion beyond representation

The issue of inclusivity in peacebuilding processes was one the central themes throughout the conference. Contemporary peace processes continue to rely on elite diplomacy while excluding local communities, women, youth, and civil society organizations from meaningful and rightful participation. This was highlighted specifically during the session on DDR, namely, women in disarmament processes and their role as peace mediators. Despite common assumptions about the passivity and vulnerability of women during conflicts, in fact, women have always been an integral part of them. In Colombia, for example, women make up 40% of the FARC combatants, occupying diverse and active roles in the armed groups. Yet, reintegration programs are often based on gendered assumptions, making women politically irrelevant and invisible in these processes. This exclusion is not limited to gender alone; the speakers repeatedly criticized the top-down approach that puts the political reality aside.

Community leaders, grassroots organizations, municipalities, and civil society actors are not merely supplementary participants but a central source of knowledge and trust that external mediators often lack. Discussions regarding Syria were a case of the role that civil society organizations played in the wake of the downfall of the Assad Regime. Similarly, the role of youth further reinforced this broader argument. Youth have increasingly been involved in activism, mediation, and advocacy, yet their participation is still often reduced to tokenistic representation. All these taken together show that inclusion is not just a question of morality, but recognition of all

these actors as rightful political participants is a requirement for a sustainable peacebuilding process.

Mediation, dialogue, and the crisis of liberal peacebuilding

Even within a complex geopolitical context where there is a lack of unity inside the EU to effectively deliver its values as grounds for peace, it is necessary to use dialogue and mediation as key tools to ensure sustainable peace. Mediation should be intersectoral and multi-level, where decision-makers in peace deals are bringing into the process local actors, while effectively coordinating networks to actually form peace, responsive to the needs of civil society in non-Western contexts. Civil society is not simply a victim of conflict, but a critical element for a transactional and transparent peace process working both top-down and bottom-up. This is exactly what we form as positive peace oriented on the community, leading to fully formed, durable outcomes.

Positive peace is shaped by accountability and justice, where international law as a key legal framework would be effectively implemented to keep responsible for conflict and violence accountable in front of civil society and all actors involved. And traditionally anticipated actors such as criminal groups and corporations encompassed within peace networks might also become a valuable source of expertise in the process, even though they are traditionally not included in the peace framework.

Technology and the transformation of peace processes

Technologies passed down as procedural innovations within the peacemaking community are both an opportunity and a threat. As for opportunities, it is already effectively embodied as a mechanism to predict future conflict and work on conflict-anticipatory measures. Also, it is helpful in collecting data and outsourcing routine tasks to focus more on analytical and impactful work in peacemaking. Finally, technologies, and especially AI, are able to provide a platform and navigate fragmented networks or bring together various actors. This way, communication with civil society organizations and micro-level peace agents might be organized successfully. However, there is still a threat of encouraging mistrust and abuse of open-source technologies by conflict-amplifying actors, producing even more violence and dehumanization of the peace process. It is necessary to balance the use of AI and technologies, not to lose a human face of the peace process, and provide control over technological spaces to prevent the spread of misinformation, abuse, and ill-intended actions. Still, there is room for improvement due to limited investment in hardware and software that are able to absorb process load on technological networks, especially outside world high-tech centers. Peace communities and digital communities have to create symbiotic relations and provide institutional empowerment rather than erosion.

Reflections

The future of peacebuilding will depend on its ability to move beyond rigid institutions focused on formal peace procedure, and future mediation efforts will require a comprehensive work on different levels, including state bodies and micro-level local organizations. Ultimately, the Bologna Peacebuilding Forum reinforces the idea that sustainable peace does not equate the absence of violence alone, but rather a number of elements and the addressing of conditions that produced the conflict in the first place. Coming from regions shaped by war, colonialism, inequality, and political fragmentation, we approached discussions on peacebuilding with a critical perspective.

Indeed, peacebuilding initiatives remain a top-down process leading to superficial outcomes while overlooking real societal divisions and the voices of those affected directly by the conflict. We reflected on the importance of including stigmatized actors, local communities, and perspectives from all sides of conflicts in mediation processes. As young people from outside the European Union, we aspire not to remain passive observers but to actively contribute to more inclusive and people-centered approaches to peacebuilding despite polarization, mistrust, and geopolitical obstacles. Peace has a human face: diverse, shaped by many voices and experiences and we are ready to become part of it.