Brief: Strategic Workshop on Peace Technology

19 September 2018

Felm (Suomen Lähetysseura), SaferGlobe, Finn Church Aid and CMI organized a workshop on peace technology with participants from various professional backgrounds. The workshop was launched with introductions of topics, which later guided the discussion in smaller groups (learning café). The topics were as follows:

- Peacetech and future strategy for Finland (Maria Mekri, SaferGlobe)
- Peacetech for end-users and peacebuilding practitioners (Matthias Wevelsiep, Finn Church Aid)
- Conflict sensitivity in peacetech (Tanja Viikki, Felm)
- Artificial Intelligence in peacetech (Tuomas Paasonen, Futurice)

Peacetech and future strategy for Finland

Finland has both innovation capabilities, knowledge of technology, influence and resources but Finland needs partners who understand the needs and challenges of conflict situations so that technologies match the needs of the local populations. Conflict contexts are often characterized by fragility, which means that there may be surprising challenges but also that some things may be easier than expected.

The discussion identified "a missing middle" between strategies and political aspirations that Finland could try to bridge by creating a reusable umbrella concept that would bring different actors together to create solutions. For example, abstract SDGs may be difficult to put into practice if it is difficult to know what is meant exactly and what are the outcomes that are sought after. Different agencies and international actors may have limited communication with one another, which leads more complication when strategies are made operational.

The Finnish PeaceTech could focus on high, innovative technologies, while focusing on the needs of the communities and the practitioners. The important elements in the Finnish peacetech are cooperation, cyclical learning, feedback and creating standards e.g. for impact. Mapping the Finnish PeaceTech more carefully would show gaps in current knowledge and lead to potential of strengthening the Finnish PeaceTech in the longer term.

Peacetech for end-users and peacebuilding practitioners

Discussion was concentrated on peace practitioners' actual needs, asking what they are, and could we see technology helping in these needs? Complexity, daily dynamism and lack of knowledge of local level were seen as the main issues of peace building activities on the ground. Conflict affected people tend to manage (social) conflicts on their own initiative, which makes the local level a pivotal resource. Therefore, we need to know how the "local" and "social" works and be flexible in the face of their complexities. This means that we should not expect or assume linear cumulation of knowledge but constant change of networks and information instead.

However, techniques for analysing complexity is greatly challenging. There are already existing analysing mechanisms (e.g. predictions based on flows and early warnings systems), but better tools are still needed. We need to move closer to the local level, and to the complexity of human relationships and identity. Furthermore, existing platforms are needed, since peacetech can only enhance the analysis of existing hubs of information, not create social processes in a vacuum. For example, Twitter and community radios are such media that peacetech could help analyse. There are some concerns, however, as practitioners do not fully know how the social media operates. Fake news is bound to spread faster than actual news and local level data could be weaponized if it would get in the wrong hands.

Conflict sensitivity in peacetech

Discussion on conflict sensitivity was opened with a few questions including how to avoid peacetech becoming wartech, how to enhance and support conflict sensitive research and data collection, and how to navigate the information overload and enhance peace narratives. It was noted that peacebuilding as such often about trying to make other parties accept an asymmetrical solution. Inclusiveness and empowering the grass root level, as well as bringing stakeholders closer to each other in order to reach a necessary consensus was highlighted as important. In Syria, for example, there is a great deal of division on the grass root due to countless different grievances, and this makes it difficult to group people together. Therefore, rather than promoting consensus, information technology often tends to create fragmentation. It was also pointed out that when it comes to information technology, it is often thought that more information makes people understand each other, when in reality this is not always the case.

There are serious ethical concerns about the danger of big data not taking into account specific contexts, and the information gathering process possibly re-traumatising the population. Another major concern is if wrong parties get a hold of the gathered data, as witnessed in Syria where conflict parties used monitoring data to locate their enemies. It was also highlighted that sometimes technology can even be used to create data, and this false data can create an image of a situation that is not real.

It was pointed out how important it is in data collection to ensure the feedback loop: same channels that are used to collect information should be used to provide feedback to the sources of information. It has to be clear for the people for what purpose and to whom the data is collected. Further is was

stressed that people interpret the same information in different ways, and that information technology enables fast responses that may cause harm. Moreover, the safety of the sources of the information sources has to be secured. It was emphasized that the governments are often conflict parties which complicates the information gathering and sharing. Linked to this it was discussed what could be potential risks, but also for benefits and opportunities in profitable peacetech that would not be depending on the traditional donor money.

It was noted that stakeholders operating in different technological fields seem to have their own ethical guidelines that often overlap with each other and suggested that there should be one overarching general set of guidelines for all actors in the field of peacetech. On the other hand, it was also stressed that companies working in different technological fields are often in need to make their own concrete ethical guidelines, as they have their own specific contexts.

Artificial Intelligence in peacetech

Artificial intelligence (AI) still works only for limited tasks. Then again, what you want in peacetech solutions is partial solutions with minimal risks, so it kind of works nicely together. We don't really know what self-learning machines pick up from the learning data. This is why critical decisions should not be left for computers alone: AI works best in co-operation with humans. Some ideas of applications brought up in the discussion: Twitter-police to identify fake news, Google search analysis, transcription and analysis of local radio channels and empowering grass-root level by making the unheard groups visible.

A discussion was concentrated in the prospects of actor analysis: what the risks and benefits would be if such a database of actors' preferences, interests and goals was to exist. Perceived risks can be categorized under concerns of access, groupism and verification. Concerning the question of access, it is clear that many actors would be eager to get their hands to the data to use it to further their own agenda, whatever it may be. At worst, this could expose actors to danger, but it could also be used to find the right actors to bribe. These aspects beg the question: who should be given access to the database? Another risk of the database is its potential tendency to enforce groupism. Some groups could be preferred to others, trivial groups could be over-emphasized, stereotypes could be unintentionally enforced, or group mentality could be enforced altogether. This could also risk consensus building efforts as extensive inclusion tend to fragment the process in short term. Last concern is the reliability of the data. How are we able to verify who says what and if they are sincere in their expressed preferences? Also, it would not be an easy task to choose correct indicators and operationalize them.

Potential benefits of the database can be categorized to three groups as well: scientific usefulness, practical usefulness and ethical benefit. Scientifically the database could contribute to researchers' ability to see connections and their change over time. This could lead to more dynamic knowledge of the present and to deconstruction of the reductionist narratives of the conflict. Practically the most obvious benefit would be the database's contribution to ability to prevent disasters or unintended consequences. It could also reveal potential partnerships or entry points to key blocks of conflict. In ethical sense the database could increase inclusiveness and openness and give voice to marginal groups. However, one should keep in mind that this holds the risk of leading to aforementioned groupism.

Conclusion

The rapidly changing and developing technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) can open up new avenues for end-users and peace practitioners. Despite the potential of peaceteach, there are several concerns one should bear in mind, such as those of complexity and the need for analysing tools, access, groupism and verification. It is important to make sure that inclusiveness and empowering the grass root level are at the core when utilizing peacetech.