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Digital Inclusion in Peacemaking

Summary of Findings

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Digital Inclusion in Peacemaking Project was carried out from January to December 2019 at the CCDP, Graduate Institute of Geneva. The project aimed to support the mediation community in effectively using digital technologies to enhance inclusion in peace processes. To this end, it conducted an assessment of the current uses of digital technology by mediation professionals and undertook a review of applications in adjacent fields, such as development and humanitarian aid, from which the mediation community can benefit. In collaboration with the non-profit organization Build Up, the project also ran a participatory online course, which contributed to the development of illustrative use cases of technology for digital inclusion, along four different peacemaking scenarios. This project was funded by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Peace processes are increasingly digitized. Conflict parties and conflict stakeholders use digital technologies, and especially social media, to further their agendas and interests. Mediators can respond to this trend through digital inclusion.
- Digital inclusion in peacemaking means that the voices of conflict stakeholders are integrated into a peace process in the form of digital data. “Voice” can be understood as various kinds of information that are expressed intentionally by the conflict party or stakeholder, in an attempt to change an objectionable state of affairs.
- Digital inclusion can serve various strategic objectives, such as strengthening the legitimacy of peace processes and their outcomes, empowering marginalized and vulnerable groups, transforming community relationships, or reducing threats or risks to a peace process.
- The project introduced a conceptual framework for digital inclusion, which helps to understand how digital technologies can contribute to any of these strategic objectives by delivering specific functions and outputs.
- When designing digital inclusion, the experiences and insights from adjacent fields are helpful, such as development aid and humanitarian relief. Translating this knowledge to peacemaking, the report summarizes specific technology use cases that implement digital inclusion.
- To facilitate digital inclusion effectively, mediators need to consider a variety of context factors, as well as associated risks and unintended consequences. These are related to the technological, social-cultural, and political environment, in which digital inclusion efforts are implemented.

THE DIGITIZATION OF PEACE PROCESSES

Mediation is commonly understood as a human-centered activity. Similarly, inclusion in peace processes has dominantly been understood in analog and “offline” terms, such as providing seats at the table to civil society representatives. Yet, peace processes are becoming digitized. Many conflict parties make proactive use of the increasing availability of digital technologies to further their interests and agendas. What is more, other conflict stakeholders and the general population increasingly use digital technologies to obtain information about the conflict, partake in political activities, or engage in conflict resolution efforts. Social media applications play a particularly crucial role in forming political opinion and facilitating political mobilization. Digital technologies also open up new opportunities for communication and engagement in peacebuilding that did previously not exist.

Mediators can respond to this trend through digital inclusion. Digital technology, and especially social media, can have positive and negative effects on peace processes. Currently, many mediators continue to associate digital technologies with the risk of losing control over the process, for instance through security breaches and leaks. The Project explored the positive potential of technology, particularly its utility in facilitating inclusive peacemaking. It is a contribution to building the mediation community’s knowledge base of how to harness the utility of technology for peacemaking, while being aware of its limitations and risks.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: MORE THAN “TOOLS”

Digital technologies (or digital ICTs – Information and communication technologies) are understood as devices, platforms, or techniques that communicate, process, and store data. Digital technologies thus encompass both tangible electronic equipment (i.e., hardware) and intangible applications and platforms (software) that are used to work with data. Importantly, technologies are more than just “tools” or “gadgets”: it is essential to go beyond these material aspects of technology and ask about the knowledge, skills and values required to utilize them. Because technologies are socially embedded, they always evolve jointly with specific political - and peacebuilding – initiatives. When asking how digital technology can serve peacemaking, it is thus vital to take a strategic approach that sets out which purpose a specific technology should serve, when used to enhance inclusion.

FOUR STRATEGIC PURPOSES OF DIGITAL INCLUSION

Along with its rising popularity, the approaches to inclusion, and the rationales to strengthen it, have considerably diversified. Many of the existing approaches to inclusion implicitly or explicitly correspond with deeper considerations about the causes and dynamics of conflict, and how inclusion can help to address, mitigate, and overcome them.¹ To matter for peace processes, inclusion should therefore be understood as purposeful. Inclusion is not an end in itself but a means to an end and can serve various rationales. Drawing on this insight, the project has identified four major strategic purposes of *digital* inclusion:

¹ Andreas T Hirblinger and Dana M Landau, “Daring to Differ? Strategies of Inclusion in Peacemaking,” *Security Dialogue*, January 31, 2020, 096701061989322, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010619893227>.

- Digital inclusion to build the legitimacy of peace processes and their outcomes by involving a broad range of stakeholders beyond the principal conflict parties.
- Digital inclusion to empower marginalized groups by providing opportunities for participation in peace processes and political institutions.
- Digital inclusion to transform relationships underlying conflict and build community by focusing on the relational dynamics between conflict parties and stakeholders.
- Digital inclusion to protect vulnerable groups and reduce the risk of continued violence by enabling early warning and early action.

It is important to note that many, if not all, current efforts to strengthen inclusion already rely on digital technology. This starts with the use of email or text messaging services to communicate with the conflict parties and stakeholders. However, digital inclusion aims to achieve the various strategic purposes primarily through digital means, through which the views and needs of conflict parties and stakeholders are articulated, transmitted, and integrated into the peace processes.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VOICE

Conventional forms of inclusion ultimately require the physical presence of a representative at the negotiation table, or in any other inclusion format, such as a consultation or a workshop. These representatives can ensure that their preferences are communicated in a direct manner to the mediator and other conflict parties and stakeholders, to inform the ongoing peace process. Crucially, when using digital technology, messages are translated into digital data and transmitted by digital means. This means that the data is split from the sender. However, it is crucial that this data remains representative.

This should be reflected in any definition of digital inclusion. Therefore, digital inclusion in peacemaking should mean that the voice of conflict stakeholders is integrated into a peace process in the form of digital data. As “voice”, we can understand various kinds of information that are expressed by the conflict party or stakeholder, including factual information, preferences, experiences, opinions, or beliefs. The emphasis on voice is important, because it limits the kinds of information and data relevant to inclusion to that which has been intentionally expressed by the conflict party or stakeholder, with the aim of giving an account of oneself in an attempt to change an objectionable state of affairs.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To chart out an actionable pathway to achieve each of these strategic objectives, it is helpful to think in greater detail about the individual functions that digital technologies have to fulfill, and the outputs they need to generate. The conceptual framework developed as part of this project details the strategic purposes that digital inclusion can serve, as well as the functions and outputs that digital technologies must deliver to contribute to these purposes. The framework is not prescriptive, but provides a heuristic resource, through which mediation professionals can consider how to use digital technology, and for what purpose. Importantly, not all functions are required to achieve a specific output or strategic objective. [This table](#) presents an overview of the relationships between functions, outputs and strategic purpose of digital inclusion.

ILLUSTRATIVE USE CASES

The uses cases developed in the course of this project provide a first compendium of possible applications for digital inclusion. It is important to note that they are intended as learning examples. All applied use cases must be carefully tailored to the specific peace process context, as well as to the requirements of those who include and those who are included, if digital inclusion is to be effective. These use cases are documented on the [project's website](#).



IMPORTANT CONTEXT FACTORS

Effective digital inclusion requires that a use case fits the environment in which it is applied. It is also important to consider potential challenges in the development and implementation of the use case. The project has also identified the most important factors that influence the effective use of digital technologies when fostering digital inclusion along three interrelated dimensions:

- Technological factors: The overall technological landscape defines what technologies can be used in a given context, as well as when and how. Such factors include the availability of electricity, the availability of ICTs, platform popularity and usage as well as the technology design.
- Socio-cultural factors: Digital inclusion is also conditioned by the social and cultural environment in which technologies are utilized. This influences not only the behavior of individual users, but as well the user demography. Such factors include digital literacy, barriers to ICT use (gendered, linguistic, demographic), social hierarchies, as well as the culture of digital technology use.
- Political factors: The properties of the political system and the behavior of governing institutions form a third relevant category of factors, which is arguably the category most acknowledged and discussed by mediation professionals. Such factors include political surveillance, state oppression and control of ICTs, as well as the cyber resilience of civil society organizations.

OUTLOOK

As digital technologies play a growing role in peace processes, efforts to broaden participation beyond the main conflict parties will also increasingly be carried out through digital means. Contemporary mediation efforts are already considerably dependent on various types of digital technologies, such as messaging applications, social media, and websites. While the notion of a technology-free, and thus controllable, environment still persists, many mediators could not effectively carry out their work without the use of technology. At the same time, conflict parties and stakeholders increasingly use digital technologies. The Digital Inclusion in Peacemaking Project has undertaken the first comprehensive attempt to respond to these trends through a systematic approach to digital inclusion.

Digital inclusion in peacemaking, as a concept and as a practice, is still in its infancy. There is a need for a more nuanced discussion about the added value and the strategic purposes of digital inclusion, to which this project has aimed to contribute. But while many mediators and mediation professionals contemplate the use of digital technology, initiatives that go beyond ad-hoc uses by mediation team members have often proven difficult to implement. This is not least due to the perceived risks, which often lead to a selective and cautious approach to technology. However, many mediators also fail to factor in the risks of not using technology. When weighing risks and benefits, mediators should go beyond short-term calculations and focus on the longer-term picture: steadily developing the field's capacity to address the digital dimensions of conflict.
