



GENEVA
peacebuilding
PLATFORM

Geneva Peace Week 2021 Thematic Track Report

Confronting inequalities and advancing inclusion, peace, and SDG16

Will McDermott

DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance

Confronting inequalities and advancing inclusion, peace, and SDG16

Geneva Peace Week 2021 (GPW21) took place from 1-5 November 2021, featuring Online Workshops and a Digital Series that focused on four main thematic tracks. This report will summarize the key emerging insights from the 8 workshops and 9 digital series offerings within the thematic track, ***“Confronting inequalities and advancing inclusion, peace, and SDG16”***. This track called on actors to reflect on the linkages between inequalities, inclusion and peace, and how greater emphasis on these elements could yield greater progress in building peace. In addition, this thematic track proposed SDG16 as a framework for bringing together inequalities, inclusion and peace, and to consider how effective SDG16 is at building peace. This note summarizes the most important insights and points of discussion from GPW21.

Diversity of actors that address inequalities, inclusion and peace. One theme which came up repeatedly throughout the various discussions, was the sheer diversity of different actors involved in peacebuilding. Workshops focused on a variety of topics including gender, education, mental health, human rights, impunity and conflict prevention, which demonstrate and reiterate how building peace requires a holistic, whole-of-society approach. Allowing inequalities to exist and grow can undermine peace building efforts, and lead to greater social cleavages and divisions. In this regard, the thematic track workshops frequently focused on the need to engage with and strengthen the participation of vulnerable and minority groups, and more generally those groups that wield less power in a society, such as children, people suffering from psychological trauma, victims of violence and hate crimes, and women.

Inherent in these discussions was the need to create better, broader and more inclusive dialogues, both at the local and national level, but also among international organizations and international NGOs. The international community must recognize its role in perpetuating existing inequalities while also seeking ways to build more equal and inclusive power structures, while also striving to balance the principle to do no harm. In several sessions, Geneva Peace Week was recognized as a useful platform to facilitate these discussions and create new dialogues across sectors. Several sessions were dedicated precisely to this objective, including one video on promoting peace in Africa from Geneva, a session on sharing lessons and experiences in peacebuilding between the sustainable development and human rights sectors, and another on lessons learning in integrating gender within the peacebuilding community.

Peace manifests in different ways and requires different pathways to build peace.

Closely related to the notion of the diversity of actors involved in peacebuilding is the notion that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to peace, and that peace can even manifest in different ways depending on the specific situation. Concepts of peace have evolved over the years, from a “negative peace”, i.e. the absence of violence, to a more holistic “positive peace,” in which peace is linked with social justice and equality, and more recently “sustainable peace”, captured in the United Nations’ Sustaining Peace Agenda from 2018, which presents peace as a continuum that must be sustained before, during and after conflict. Many of these concepts and evolutions to the notion of peace were present in this thematic track. A number of workshops and digital series offerings explored how to rebuild peace during or after violent conflict has occurred, such as on how to reintegrate children and youth formerly associated with the armed forces, how to address trauma and emotional distress during conflict, and the consequences for those who have suffered from the use of non-lethal weapons. However, many others explored how to sustain peace and prevent the onset of violent conflict. One session explored how education can prevent violence, another looked at how to leverage existing human rights special procedures mechanisms to prevent human rights violations and violence, while another examined how early warning systems can prevent the onset of conflict. Given this wide range of different points of intervention and different actors involved in building peace, there is obviously a need for flexibility in dictating how to build peace, while at the same time some common framework to bring together these efforts.

SDGs as a framework for bringing together collective action on peace. The Sustainable Development Goals are a truly global agenda, adopted and agreed to by all UN member states. A notable addition to the SDGs from its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals, was the inclusion of peace into the global sustainable development agenda through SDG16. Not only did SDG16 seek to aspire to promote peace, but contained within it were broader aspirations for a positive and sustainable peace, by strengthening justice, rule of law, transparency, accountability and inclusivity. Through peace’s inclusion in the SDGs, it builds more concrete connections between peace and the wide-ranging themes which made up this thematic track’s 8 workshops and 9 digital series offerings: health (SDG3), education (SDG4), gender (SDG5), decent work (SDG8), reducing inequalities (SDG10) and violence (SDG16.1), ending violence against children (SDG16.2), promoting good governance and ending impunity (SDG16.6), and strengthening regional frameworks and partnerships (SDG17). SDG16, while imperfect, provides this flexible but common framework to guide global and local efforts.