Technology in Fragile Contexts

Engagement, Partnerships, and Positive Action

JUSTPEACE Labs

LSE !deas

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This report is published in collaboration with LSE IDEAS. We held a workshop with industry experts, NGOs, community representatives, and academics in March 2021. The results of that conversation are reflected in the policy recommendations below. In addition to all the workshop participants, we'd like to thank Dr. Mary Martin and Dr. Vesna Bojičić-Dželilović from LSE IDEAS and Helena Puig Larrauri from Build Up for their collaboration on this project.

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Published by:

JustPeace Labs
Justpeacelabs.org
@justpeacelabs
Info [at] justpeacelabs.org

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Introduction

This briefing paper examines how we can build multi-stakeholder partnerships to bolster the contribution of information and communication technologies (ICT or "technology") to peace and human security. Collaboration and partnering among diverse actors and building new types of mutually beneficial relationships are critical to leverage technology's positive contributions to peace and sustainable development goals (SDGs) and avoid its abuse for the pursuit of conflict. Facilitating transformative partnerships requires constructive engagement between tech companies and local communities affected by their products, services, and business models. The proposals in this briefing paper provide a starting point for companies, civil society, academics, and policymakers to catalyze such engagement. This paper highlights the need for a systemic understanding of the uses and impacts of technology in fragile and conflict settings (FCS) and a bottom-up and people-centered approach to building sustainable partnerships. It sets out key initial steps to improve coordination between stakeholders and fill gaps in research, understanding, and policy. From this will follow the development of specific tools and guidance for tech companies working in FCS.

The briefing paper is based on ideas developed in a discussion paper and a 2-day roundtable discussion with experts from the private sector, civil society organizations, community representatives, and academia held in March 2021. It is intended to create momentum for change and positive action by multiple stakeholders as they respond to the increasing importance of digital technologies.

Recommendations in Brief

To address the challenges to effective engagement between the tech industry and local stakeholders in FCS, especially typical users and marginalized communities, stakeholders must make efforts in multiple priority areas. Therefore, we urge business leaders, academics, and civil society to consider the following high-level recommendations:

For all stakeholders:

1. Support a multi-stakeholder process.
2. Develop a bespoke policy framework and implementation guidance.
3. Engage in critical research.
4. Accommodate discomfort and adversity.
5. Build inclusive engagement practices.

For companies:

6. Prioritize sustained community engagement.
7. Enhance the capacity of internal teams.
8. Support joint engagement.

For civil society:

9. Focus on shared opportunities.
10. Coordinate engagement strategies.

Engaging with the Tech Industry

To facilitate effective partnerships for peace and human security, some specific features of the tech industry may require new thinking. The technology industry is unique in its business models, value propositions, size, speed of development, and global reach. The extent to which technology is now embedded in nearly all aspects of our lives and communities is particularly distinctive and impacts how companies and communities can realize transformative partnerships. This section sets out preliminary considerations for developing practice and behavioral changes for multi-stakeholder engagement.

Over-arching guidance is needed for all internet and digital technology companies, regardless of location, business model, or product/service. Tech companies are diverse and encompass various services, products, value propositions, and business models. Many current efforts to mitigate the harms of technology focus on specific product offerings or particular technologies, such as social media platforms or artificial intelligence. Different technology products, services, and diverse industry segments each present distinct challenges, and individual companies and contexts will require bespoke engagement strategies. However, an overarching policy can be helpful across industry segments and the broad networks of stakeholders in this field. As such, this brief seeks to develop core concepts relevant to an expansive notion of the "tech industry" that includes companies (multi-national and local), NGOs, trade associations, regulators, investors, academics, and others working with and on internet communications and digital technology.

Understanding the ecosystem of technology functions and users is vital for understanding the impact of technology and laying the groundwork for partnerships to mitigate harm and bolster benefits.

Effective engagement will depend on a deep context-specific understanding of how and why different technologies are used and by whom. Technologies change quickly—as do their uses. It is essential to understand the function of technologies in each context—such as data collection, communications, or networking—and how local actors use them. People living in rural communities may access and use technology differently than their urban counterparts. Customers, users, and third parties can alter, limit, or expand one company's technology into something unintended or unexpected by the original creator. Different considerations apply if the "user" is a community, state, government, or company. Some factors, such as adapting (or not) a particular user interface or design, business model, product, or system to specific contexts, may impact whether that technology contributes to harm. Understanding the ecosystem of technology functions and users is vital for understanding the impact of technology and laying the groundwork for partnerships to mitigate harm and bolster benefits. However, there is still limited access to sufficient data on these issues. Improved transparency combined with inclusive partnerships can help fill that gap by providing systemic, context-specific information.

Technology's influence on conflict and peace is part of a deep ecosystem. The harms and benefits stemming from ICT are part of a complex and shifting system. For social media, for example, harms range from outright violence arising from hate speech and misinformation to negative societal impacts such as polarization and ethnic divisions. However, current efforts to mitigate harms tend to focus on finite typologies of impacts. Addressing the harms or benefits of technology implicitly impacts other areas of the system—including at a geopolitical level—sometimes in unintended or unanticipated ways. The same approach to mitigating similar risks may not work in all contexts, depending on cultural and contextual dynamics such as how users manage networks of trust offline, the cultural significance of reporting bad behavior from within the community, and what is considered harmful within that context.

ICT is now a core part of nearly all global industries. Companies from other industries that are increasingly relying on technology—such as agriculture, extractives, garment, transportation, health, hospitality, publishing, or financial services—can also impact human security and create unintended negative consequences of technology.

Identifying entry points for engagement is challenging for companies with global users. The largest and most influential tech companies do not often operate in the countries where many of their users and customers are based. They are often owned, operated, and staffed by employees that are physically, linguistically, and culturally distant from a significant segment of their users. They have established company cultures and protocols that rarely consider the complexities of doing business in FCS. These differences tend to impede effective communication and engagement between those companies and their users' communities, resulting in more significant challenges in forming effective partnerships. Moreover, ICT is now a core part of nearly all global industries. Companies from other industries that are increasingly relying on technology—such as agriculture, extractives, garment, transportation, health, hospitality, publishing, or financial services—can also impact human security and create unintended negative consequences of technology.

Efforts to date have been ad hoc. To date, no multi-stakeholder process exists for the tech industry related to doing business in FCS. However, many civil society organizations and communities—especially those based in FCS—are left out of conversations about changes they want to see in the technologies that profoundly influence their security. And those who do engage with companies are asking them to take on myriad issues, such as business and human rights, conflict sensitivity, responsible data, privacy, ethics, transparency, fair taxation, and sustainability. Given the speed of technology development and the diversity of business models and technologies, there are gaps and incongruencies in capacities and efforts. Moreover, while each message is independently valuable, the lack of coordination and an integrated approach means that multiple initiatives risk drowning each other out.

Understanding the distinctive nature of technology's role in conflict drives the need for a more structured and ongoing engagement through collaboration and partnership at the local level.

Effective Transformation Requires a Systemic Framework

In the tech industry, community engagement is critical. Technology impacts communities and societies in fundamental ways. It influences the way we think, act, speak with others, and live our lives. Technology companies often need to engage "at scale" and respond quickly—sometimes within hours—to severe risks. Addressing one risk can give rise to others previously unforeseen, and those risks will be different depending on the community and context. Most existing approaches to framing engagement—needed for adopting a common language and goals, building in accountability for positive action—are based on human rights. But traditional frameworks for addressing responsible business practices will not meet all of the needs to address and mitigate the risks of tech companies doing business in FCS.

While much can be learned from experience with other industries doing business in FCS, the tech industry requires a bespoke framework to address the integral nature of technology in our communities. Significant work has been done on human rights, conflict sensitivity, and ethical guidelines for the tech industry. However, none of these existing approaches fully captures the opportunities and risks of technology in FCS. Specifically, stakeholders need to incorporate and blend approaches to systemically encompass the nuances of working in FCS, the potential for positive impacts, and accountability.

A model developed by LSE IDEAS, the "Human Security Business Partnership Framework," focuses on local empowerment, promising to build on and add new dimensions to existing, necessary approaches such as human rights, conflict sensitivity, corporate social responsibility, and the "do no harm" principle.[1] It is a helpful, holistic starting point for engagement. Human security is people-centered and locally driven. It emphasizes the existence of broad, interconnected threats. At the same time, it seeks to protect against harms and provide more agency for individuals and communities to address threats and opportunities in ways that best reflect their needs, interests, capacities, and local dynamics. Under a human security framework, addressing the interlinked issues that undermine peoples' welfare and life prospects requires meaningful engagement between technology companies and local communities as part of multi-stakeholder partnerships. As discussed above,

> *Human security is people-centered and locally driven. It seeks to both protect against interconnected harms and provide more agency for individuals and communities to address threats and opportunities in ways which best reflect their needs, interests, capacities, and local dynamics.*

[1] LSE IDEAS, People, Profits, and Peace.

unique features of the tech industry mean that effectively addressing the risks of technology in FCS requires a deep and nuanced understanding of technology in that context and dynamic conflict situations. In this way, companies can proactively and preventatively improve local contexts while benefiting both business and local people.[2] Human security approaches to engagement seek to mobilize those affected by business presence in collaborative efforts to find innovative and sustainable solutions that reflect their needs, interests, and capacities.

A human security approach would necessarily draw on other frameworks, including human rights, conflict sensitivity, and ethics. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights are a core and essential part of building partnerships on technology in FCS. Much important work has been done to mainstream the UNGPs and integrate effective human rights protections into business practices—including with the tech industry.

UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights are an essential part of building partnerships on technology in FCS. Human rights could be bolstered by other frameworks such as conflict sensitivity to help articulate broad and complex tech-related impacts.

In FCS, protecting one human right may exacerbate the conflict or cause other adverse human rights impacts. Conflict sensitivity could help companies understand how their products and services impact conflict dynamics.

There are some areas where other frameworks could bolster human rights to help articulate broad and complex tech-related impacts in FCS. For example, they could expand the typically narrow focus on the "caused, contributed, or directly linked" attribution of responsibility for adverse human rights impacts. They can also help companies decide how to balance different rights—in FCS, protecting one human right may exacerbate the conflict or require balancing with other rights. They could shift companies' focuses from harm mitigation to building opportunities for peace and development. A conflict sensitivity approach, for example, would "enhance" existing human rights due diligence by considering conflict drivers and impacts of corporate actions on the conflict itself, in addition to human rights.[3] This could prompt a broader understanding of risks and lead to better remedies for harm. Ethical guidelines are also helpful for guiding tech companies, especially when building a culture and value system across a company. However, for FCS contexts, corporate ethics policies alone may not be sufficient to address conflict drivers, address accountability gaps, nor harness the opportunity for building peace. These frameworks need to be combined for the most effective approach.

[2] LSE IDEAS, People, Profits, and Peace.

[3] JustPeace Labs, Conflict Sensitivity for the Tech Industry (2020).

Recommendations

To address the challenges to effective engagement between the tech industry and local stakeholders in FCS, especially typical users and marginalized communities, stakeholders must make efforts in multiple priority areas. Some of the most pressing are discussed below.

All Stakeholders

1. **Support efforts to establish a multi-stakeholder process on technology companies working in FCS.** The Human Security Business Partnership Framework and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development draw on multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) as critical tools. MSPs provide an opportunity to leverage the diverse strengths of multiple partners to develop innovative approaches to human security challenges in a mutually beneficial way. The hope is that collaboration through MSPs will allow stakeholders to align their diverse interests—including commercial and community-related—to generate transformation in wellbeing and sustainable development.

2. **Develop a bespoke technology-in-conflict policy framework and implementation guidance.** This framework needs to consider all relevant actors, harms, benefits, and specific actions that reflect a holistic and systemic picture of the full range of consequences of technology in FCS. Specific tools and guidance can help tech companies engage in "enhanced" due diligence for FCS and build transparency, enforcement, accountability, and community-level engagement into existing policies and practices.

3. **Engage in critical research to improve understanding and practice.** There are significant knowledge and research gaps in understanding that need to be filled to set and prioritize goals and actions. For example, there is a significant gap in interpreting and acting on data indicating which markets are high-risk, what makes them fragile, and how technology impacts conflict dynamics. Better data and analysis would help stakeholders move towards proactive prevention.

4. **Plan for and accommodate discomfort and adversity.** Community engagement in FCS requires time and energy to allow for difficult, sensitive, and potentially confrontational conversations and interventions. All stakeholders need to plan and accommodate for the fact that working in FCS is challenging, emotionally taxing, and often requires difficult decisions to be made and actions to be taken urgently, at the risk of injury or loss of life for individuals.

5. **Build inclusive engagement practices.** Engagement between the tech industry and local communities must be inclusive of diverse actors and viewpoints. Remote or rural territories, or those with security challenges are particularly complex in this regard. Engagement practices need to factor in how inclusion is perceived locally as well as the diverse expectations surrounding business-community dialogue.

Companies

6. **Prioritize sustained community engagement at all stages of product/service development.** Companies need to initiate dialogue with communities and civil society in FCS at all stages of the technology lifecycle—including design, development, and deployment. Community-

based enhanced human rights due diligence can help prevent unintended negative risks and promote and support the benefits of technology in FCS in ways that work for people in FCS. It can also help get out in front of risks and facilitate responses with the immediacy and urgency required in FCS. Tech companies need to be willing to engage with local partners on a long-term basis. A process of continuous and equitable engagement can build trust and commitment between companies and local actors, enabling the innovative and sustained collaboration that is needed.

7. **Enhance and build the capacity of internal teams to facilitate engagement.** Internal capacity on community engagement should be strengthened, including with product teams, to support constructive, inclusive partnerships. Multi-national companies should improve internal communications and connections with regional operations teams, giving local or regional employees more leverage to effect relevant policy and practice changes. Additionally, companies could explore complementary channels for engagement, such as through consultants, experts, and other third parties who can facilitate local engagement and input.

8. **Support joint engagement and shared insights.** Keeping in mind sensitivities related to competition and trade secrets, companies should share insights from engagement across the industry rather than keeping them siloed internally. This would allow for shared learning and avoid the burden on communities repeatedly asked for input on the same issues by different companies and organizations. It would also support joint efforts to support peace and human security, prompting collaboration and industry-wide opportunities for good.

Civil Society

9. **Focus on commonalities and shared opportunities.** To improve the quality of interactions and engagement, stakeholders must re-assess current practices and be encouraged to develop collaborative strategies that can articulate common risks, examine shared opportunities, and create possibilities for joint learning and problem-solving. Communities and civil society organizations need to consider how to structure engagements to increase their access to and impact within tech companies. It is important to agree on what "progress" looks like in this respect, including articulating specific goals.

10. **Coordinate engagement strategies within civil society.** Effective, inclusive engagement also requires a commitment to cooperation and coordination among civil society actors. In developing shared goals and strategies, civil society organizations need to address power imbalances within their networks. They should also take steps to break down practice silos—such as between the human rights, peacebuilding, and technology fields—and establish a shared language for action and change. They should bolster efforts to build communities of practice, engage in dialogue with other civil society actors, and understand different approaches and theories of change.

About JustPeace Labs

JustPeace Labs supports ethical and responsible approaches to technology deployed in high-risk settings. Our work advances peace and human rights protections around the world through advocacy, awareness-raising, and research on effectively shaping corporate policy on conflict-sensitive tech design and development. We provide strategic research, policy guidance, and analysis to diverse stakeholders who use or provide technology in high-risk settings. We have engaged with tech industry stakeholders on building human rights and conflict sensitivity norms into business practices. We are actively involved with academic research and international civil society mobilization efforts to strengthen partnerships between the tech industry and civil society.

This briefing paper is a part of our Ethics and Human Rights Program and is a companion piece to our Ethical Guidelines for PeaceTech and our Conflict Sensitivity for the Tech Industry guide.

About LSE IDEAS

LSE IDEAS is LSE's foreign policy and strategy think tank, currently ranked the #1 global university-affiliated think tank. Through sustained engagement with policymakers and opinion-formers, IDEAS provides a forum that informs policy debate and connects academic research with practice. IDEAS hosts interdisciplinary research projects, produces working papers and reports, holds public and off-the-record events, and delivers cutting-edge executive training programs for government, business, and third-sector organizations.

LSE IDEAS published "People, Profits, and Peace," and is preparing a follow-up report for the UN Secretary-General on the Human Security Business Partnership Framework, a governance model developed with the UN to encourage positive collaborations between the private and public sectors and civil society to address a wide range of security needs on the ground, working towards the UN's Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).