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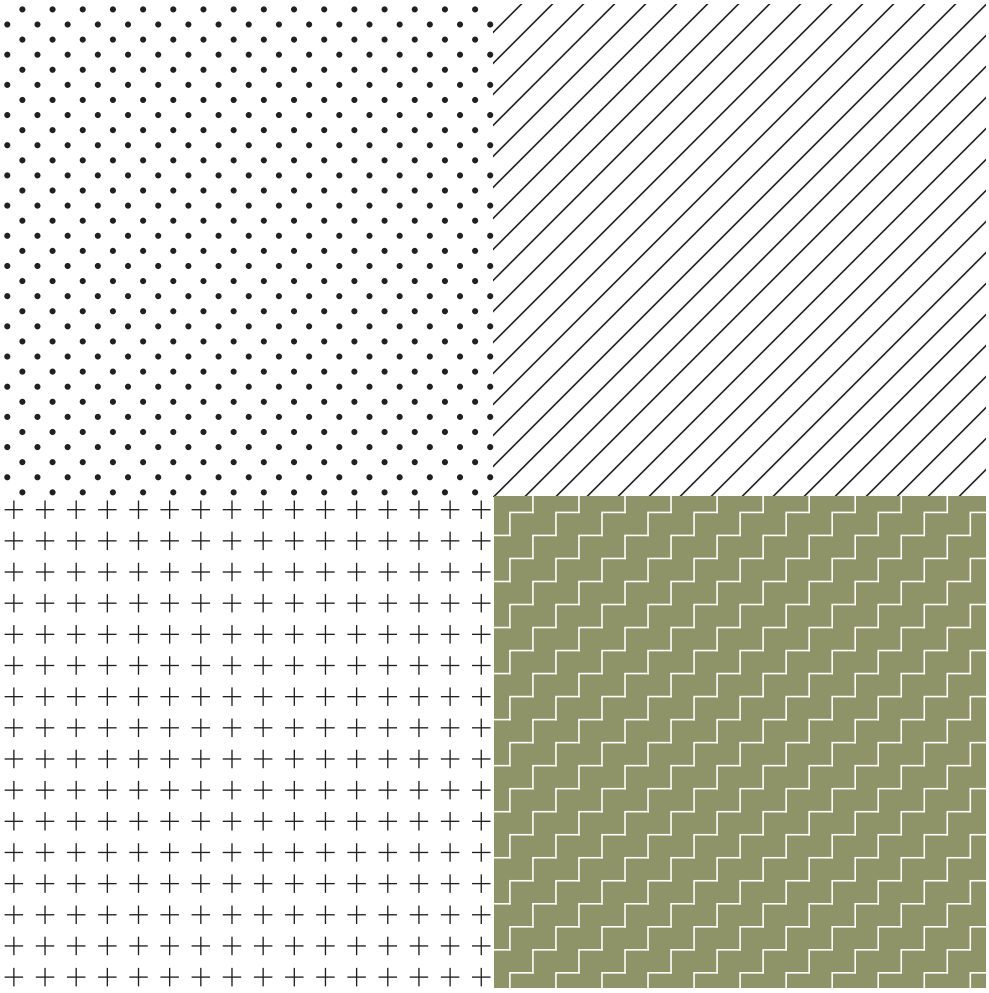

Uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for EU Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding

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USES OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICTs) FOR EU CONFLICT PREVENTION AND PEACEBUILDING

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Deliverable 2.4: Scoping Study on ICTs

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Whole of Society Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding

This scoping study was produced as part of the project "Whole of Society Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding", which aims to enhance the EU's peacebuilding and conflict prevention capabilities.

It is one of the seven scoping studies that aim to define the state of the art knowledge about civilian means for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and identify research gaps in relation to several cross-cutting themes and clusters that the project focuses on. More information at www.woscap.eu

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Executive summary

The unprecedented global adoption rates of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are rapidly changing the way people are communicating. For several years now, the role of ICTs has been a topic of discussion in various contexts such as conflict, development, humanitarian and socio-political movements. But to date little research has been undertaken into the part they might play in peacebuilding. In scoping out the possibilities for ICTs within EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding, this paper summarises the current role of ICTs in the context of peacebuilding scholarly knowledge, policy and practice with the aim of identifying further research questions and key methodological considerations.

A first challenge for a topic that remains under-researched and under-conceptualised stems from the difficulty in categorising practices. Indeed while little research has been undertaken, peacebuilding projects that use ICTs have proliferated over the past few years in disparate and wide ranging ways. Commentary initially focused on ICT tools, such as mobile phones or social media. Subsequently, authors attempted to provide a more holistic view by adopting a functional approach based on the attributes of ICTs used in peacebuilding contexts. We extend this perspective to include the agency dimension of various peacebuilding actors. We develop a socio-technical conceptual framework of leveraged 'affordances'- or functions- by these different actors. Based on emerging empirical work, we use four affordances of technology which have generally been used in peacebuilding contexts: data, communication, networking and mobilisation. We will then review existing practice by actors based on an international to local spectrum: the EU and other international governmental organisations, local and grassroots actors and the state. Using the concept of 'affordances' has two implications for our approach to this study: first it recognises that with ICTs, all the above affordances are simultaneously possible, but different actors might choose or have to leverage different ones in different contexts; secondly that this leveraging is a dynamic process which is hard to predict in practice. More specifically, we show emerging empirical evidence that although all actors leverage a wide range of ICT functions, there appears to be differences in those uses. And we suggest that more research is needed to uncover evidence of how the leveraging processes play out in peacebuilding contexts.

We further show that while the EU does not expressly have a policy on the uses of ICTs for peacebuilding, it recognises their transformative potential for society as part of its 'Digital Agenda for Europe', thus opening institutional avenues for their inclusion in its peacebuilding activities. With few examples of EU uses of ICTs, the bulk of our review focuses on other peacebuilding actors, showcasing the wide range of uses for different purposes: conflict prevention through early warning system; or rebuilding broken social ties through communication and the creation of safe spaces for contact and networking across divided communities.

These uses are generally underpinned by a positive bias in favour of the transformative potential of ICTs, but we highlight a series of operational and ethical challenges that could limit this potential. Access for example is far from homogenous, geographically, demographically and in terms of literacy. ICTs, as illustrated by the various state uses we present, can be used for or against peace; and they have also been observed to lead to simultaneous, often unintended, contradictory sets of consequences. For example, technologies used to spread messages of

peace in volatile environments can also be used to spread inflammatory rumours. In order to have meaningful impact when introduced through external support, ICTs need to be both appropriate and sustainable in a given context. Finally, current practice has not yet provided much evidence on the impact of these initiatives on political processes in conflict affected areas, a pertinent consideration for an actor such as the EU whose practices run across the multi-track diplomacy spectrum. Ethically we outline concerns specific to the technology in peacebuilding contexts: security of both users and infrastructures, ownership of systems, data and processes and collaboration with the private sector are all important considerations.

Finally we point out areas of overlap with the review agenda for EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding capabilities, as represented by activity clusters such as governance, multi-track diplomacy, security sector reform, and by cross-cutting normative issues such as local ownership, inclusivity (particularly gender) and coherence.

As empirical evidence remains very limited we build on questions raised by practitioners (Chungong 2015, Welch 2015) and academic literature (Puig Larrauri & Khal, 2013; Welch et al., 2014; Tellidis & Kappler, 2015) on inclusion, empowerment and impact, and identify the following key questions relevant to the potential uses of ICTs by the EU in its peacebuilding activities, but which remain unanswered at present:

- Has there been democratisation of technology uses in conflict affected areas? If so, what kind of democratisation has arisen? Does using ICTs in peacebuilding processes make these processes more inclusive?
- Have ICT uses led to more empowerment – and if so, whose?
- What is the nature of the dissonance between policy ideals and programming constraints?
- Can international actors empower local or grassroots actors by leveraging ICTs and can this process be sustainably locally owned?
- How can international actors support emergent, grassroots uses of ICTs for peacebuilding?
- Can technologies that are used by military and civilian peacebuilding practitioners contribute to building peace – and if so under what conditions?
- What consequences do (1), (2) and (3) have for the EU as an actor directly engaged in multi-track diplomacy?

This represents an undeniable opportunity for the EU to ground its approaches in more relevant empirical work adopting a socio-technical perspective which recognises the contingent effects of ICT uses in socio-political contexts and takes into account its many operational and ethical challenges.