Peace Building in Practice: Creating Shared Security at All Levels

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Abstract

Never before have the fates of individual communities and nations been so intertwined, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. And never before have our safety and well-being depended so much on the safety and well-being of others. A new approach to thinking about safety and security is required: an approach where we commit to our mutual well-being and equitable access to resources. Shared security is a paradigm that promotes the safety and well-being of people throughout the world. It is the idea that shared problems require shared nonviolent solutions and that our interests are best served when we foster peaceful and just relationships together. The vision of shared security is very simply the idea that “my peace is your peace”—the understanding that peace and security are indivisible. It is a peace-building paradigm and belief that we can find mutual solutions to societal problems without weapons or violence. A shared-security approach invests seriously in peace building instead of war building in the name of security. It imagines a world where leaders are mobilized not to build walls, separate families, and bomb targets but to work together to prioritize peace building, support people-powered movements, and invest in early interventions that address the root causes of conflict long before violence and discrimination erupt, dividing civil society and fracturing the institutions that enable cooperation and democracy.

Keywords Social justice · Social policy · Interventions · Methodology

Never before have the fates of individual communities and nations been so intertwined, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. And never before have our safety and well-being depended so much on the safety and well-being of others. A new approach to thinking about safety and security is required: an approach where we commit to our mutual well-being and equitable access to resources. Yet, as violence increases around

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the world, how can we as practitioners use what we know about human behavior to build a more peaceful and just world?

Violence Is Rising at All Levels

The number of countries experiencing violent conflict is the highest it has been in 30 years. Up until 2011, war was on the decline. Since 2011, violent conflict is again on the rise. According to the 2020 global peace index (GPI), the level of global peacefulness has deteriorated, with the average country score falling by 0.34% from 2019 to 2020.¹ Unfortunately, this is the ninth decline in the last 12 years. The cost of violence and conflict has improved slightly, decreasing by 0.2%, or \$29 billion from 2018 to 2019. But it is still \$1.25 trillion higher than in 2012. In addition, civil unrest—such as the insurrection in the U.S. capitol on January 6, 2021—has doubled since 2011. Ninety-six countries recorded a violent demonstration in 2019, with Europe recording the most. From 2011 to 2019, the number of riots increased by 282% and the number of strikes by 821%. The current trend toward authoritarianism was also reflected across several indicators, with the political terror scale, policing rate, and incarceration rate all deteriorating. Although the level of social unrest fell in the first half of 2020, partly due to worldwide shutdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the possibility of future violence remains high. The Middle East and North Africa region did not show an increase in these metrics, likely because the Arab Spring was at its peak in 2011 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020).

Interpersonal violence is also on the rise. Globally, the United Nations estimates that 87,000 women were killed in 2017, of which an estimated 58% were killed by intimate partners or family members. This translates to a staggering 137 women killed every day by a member of their own family (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). During the current pandemic, we have seen a rise in domestic violence, consistent with research on family dynamics that shows that stress and social isolation raise the risk of domestic violence during crises (Abramson, 2020; Serrata & Hurtado Alvarado, 2019).

Let us focus on the United States for a minute. The United States ranks 121st out of 163 countries on the 2020 GPI compared to Canada, which ranks 6th. Why are we ranked so low in peacefulness compared to Canada? Our military expenditure is one reason. U.S. military spending is remarkably high, accounting for 15% of all federal spending and half of the discretionary budget. According to Catherine Lutz (2019) at the Cost of War Project,

If you count all parts of the federal budget that are military related—including the nuclear weapons budget, the budget for fuel for military vehicles and aircraft, funds for veteran care—it makes up two thirds of the federal budget, and it's inching toward three quarters.

The United States accounts for 32% of total weapons exports. This year, we have seen civil unrest increase as protests for racial justice continue. The protests have been

¹ The GPI is an annual index that measures the presence or absence of war and the absence of violence or the fear of violence in 163 countries across three domains: safety and security, ongoing conflict, and militarization.

largely peaceful, yet militarized police and even armed groups of civilians confronted protesters. The United States has one of the highest death rates from gun violence. At 4.43 deaths per 100,000 people, the death rate from gun violence was four times higher than death rates in war-torn Syria and Yemen. Peace was deteriorating before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the current crises have put the United States at greater risk of continued internal violence. That is the bad news.

Yet there is good news to celebrate. According to the GPI, 67 countries decreased their numbers of nuclear and heavy weapons. The majority recorded improvements or decreased militarization, with 99 countries reducing the size of their armed forces. The terrorism impact indicator continued to improve, with total deaths from terrorism falling to 15,952, down from a peak of 33,555 five years earlier. Similarly, the homicide rate indicator continued its decade-long improvement, with 57 countries recording an improvement on this indicator, compared to 42 that deteriorated.

Still, the GPI reveals a world in which the root causes of many conflicts remain unresolved. There have also been new tensions arising, growing civil unrest, and dissatisfaction with governments around the world, which has led to authoritarian responses in many countries, such as Israel, Cambodia, and Kenya (American Friends Service Committee [AFSC], 2021). The current economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change are likely to exacerbate political instability, possibly triggering further violence.

Given the extraordinary challenges faced by peace builders at all levels of society—from the individual to the international—we ask, how can we use what we know about human behavior to build peace and promote just outcomes? The answer begins with the alternative models to war, militarism, and violence that we know generate more peaceful outcomes.

Shared Security: My Peace Is Your Peace

Shared security is a paradigm that promotes the safety and well-being of people throughout the world. It is the idea that shared problems require shared nonviolent solutions and that our interests are best served when we foster peaceful and just relationships. Shared security is the idea that “my peace is your peace.” It is the understanding that peace and security are indivisible. It is a peace-building paradigm and belief that we can find mutual solutions to societal problems without weapons or violence.

A shared-security approach invests seriously in peace building instead of war building in the name of security. It imagines a world where leaders are mobilized not to build walls, separate families, and bomb targets, but to work together to prioritize peace building, support people-powered movements, and invest in early interventions that address the root causes of conflict long before violence and discrimination erupt, dividing civil society and fracturing the institutions that enable cooperation and democracy.

We know from research across many disciplines—from anthropology, to political science, to neuroscience—that our behavior is shaped by many factors, from the micro to the macro. High rates of horizontal inequalities like racism and ethnonationalism are correlated with civil unrest, higher rates of stress, and poorer health outcomes

(Cederman, 2013). Biological changes caused by these experiences can be passed down from one generation to the next through epigenetics, affecting individuals' capacities for resilience and recovery in ways that researchers must work to understand (Landecker & Panofsky, 2013). But these same disciplines and the deep experiences of peace builders around the world point to many strategies for building peace and justice through shared-security approaches.

Reducing inequalities is one key strategy in building shared security. From exceptional world leaders to community activists, people are subscribing to an inclusive, egalitarian way of conducting government business. One example at the level of national governments is the model of Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern. She is showing the world what compassionate and strong leadership can look like. She is the vision of shared security. Immediately following the horrific massacre in a mosque in Christchurch, Prime Minister Ardern brought the country together in grief and banned assault weapons. This is something leaders in the United States have not been able to do. She is building her budget according to a wellness paradigm that prioritizes human needs (Freeman & Kennedy, 2018).

Implementing alternative justice systems can help build peace and reduce violence at the individual level, where new models could look like Victor Ochen's work. Ochen is an activist and peace builder. He is also a child of war and speaks frequently about his escape from northern Uganda. His parents were both murdered. His brother was abducted and killed. Many years later, Ochen interviewed a former child soldier to work for the peace-building organization that he founded. The man talked about the violence he committed, sharing that he wanted to find a way to make amends. As the former child soldier revealed details about his location, Ochen realized with horror that this was the man who killed his brother. To Ochen, shared security is finding the grace, courage, and love to forgive someone who was once a child soldier who killed his brother (Freeman & Kennedy, 2018).

Nonviolent collective action is another key strategy to build peace and social justice. Scholars Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) assembled data on nearly 330 major violent and nonviolent campaigns from 1900 to 2006. To their surprise, they found that civil resistance has been twice as effective as armed struggle—it succeeds about 52% of the time, compared to 26% for violent resistance. At the AFSC, we have supported countless trainings, movements, and individual acts of nonviolent direct action, observing time and again the enormous and lasting impact that nonviolence has (see also Mattaini, 2013).

At the same time, we can work to build more inclusive communities and societies. We can advocate for inclusive policies at all levels and address structural biases wherever we see them. In our work and in our lives, we should seek to build social cohesion. Group identities may feel static or long lasting, but they are malleable. Our brains and our bodies are plastic too. The more we understand human behavior, the more we are able to understand each other. Our awareness of our internal biases, how we perceive others as in or out, can help to reduce its power—and possibly reshape our brains and behavior (e.g., Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). Values-led communication is an important part of this process. Whenever we are trying to change hearts and minds, we can use information about the other party to find common values, the things that motivate both of us, to frame our interactions so that we have a basis for taking action together to solve collective problems (e.g., Opportunity Agenda, 2013). A shared-

security model rejects policies based on narratives of fear and military domination. Living in this model will require changes in the cultural common sense that underlies so much violence (Geertz, 1975).

Developing alternative models will also necessitate conditions where people can enjoy their human rights and meet their basic needs. It will require leaders to work together to prioritize peace building, investing in early interventions and economic development to address root causes of conflict before it erupts. Successful strategies amplify the voices of courageous peace builders: religious and community leaders working every day in communities around the world, often risking their lives to bravely promote nonviolence and mediate with those committing violence. To reduce future violence, we need to engage with disaffected communities, groups committing violence, and a serious global commitment to diplomatic and political solutions.

Conclusion

We will need to get creative. There is an extreme lack of imagination about the potential of peace building to make change. We know there are compelling alternatives to war that are rarely considered in policy circles. Imagine a world where policy makers invest in tools that exist to build peace and reduce terror (e.g., Lakey, 2015). What if countries really invest in peace building instead of militarism and use all available tools at their disposal? There is so much untapped potential: Why couldn't populations rely completely on a nonviolent toolbox for their security (see also Ardila Sánchez et al., 2020; Sharp, 1990)? Once we understand how violence occurs from global, community, and individual perspectives, we as peace builders, scientists, social workers, and other specialists do have the power to reduce violence and promote peace and justice. We can contribute to a world where violence is not so deeply entrenched, where generations do not suffer the aftereffects of war and conflict, and where families and communities can thrive.

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Code availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest On behalf of all authors, Beth Hallowell states that there is no conflict of interest.

Additional declarations for articles in life science journals that report the results of studies involving humans and/or animals Not applicable.

Ethics approval Not applicable.

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