Pioneering Peace:

Digital Inclusion and Adaptation in Response to COVID-19

Lessons From Implementing
a 'Digital Inclusion Fund'

Shift Power for Peace

About this report

In May 2020, Peace Direct launched the "Digital Inclusion Fund" to help local peacebuilders gain access to the digital tools needed to continue and adapt their work amidst the pandemic. This fund was part of Shift Power for Peace - a joint initiative of Conducive Space for Peace, Humanity United and Peace Direct. The fund provided micro-grants to 233 peacebuilders who were able to purchase tech equipment and internet access. This report shares the successes, challenges, and recommendations from this initiative.

About Conducive Space for Peace

Conducive Space for Peace is an International Peacebuilding organisation working to transform the global peacebuilding system and shifting the power to local peacebuilders.

conducivespace.org

About Humanity United

Humanity United is a foundation dedicated to cultivating the conditions for enduring freedom and peace. They support and build efforts to transform the systems that contribute to human exploitation and violent conflict.

humanityunited.org

About Peace Direct

Peace Direct is an international charity dedicated to supporting local people to stop war and build lasting peace.

peacedirect.org

Front cover image: Declares Inspirational Group Kenya, producing a radio show on peace and justice to broadcast to young people.

Acknowledgments

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Abbreviations

DIF – Digital Inclusion Fund
ICT- Information and Communication technologies
INGO – International Non-governmental Organisation
SGBV – Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Contents

Introduction

In April 2020, Shift Power for Peace - a joint initiative of Conducive Space for Peace, Humanity United and Peace Direct - hosted a series of online consultations focusing on "COVID-19 and its impact on local peacebuilding," during which over 400 peacebuilders from across the world shared their experiences of how COVID-19 was impacting their work. The subsequent report from those consultations was disseminated widely across the sector and to policymakers in Europe and the USA.

During the consultations, peacebuilders described their struggles to sustain their work, how the root causes of violence have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and the way social distancing and government-imposed restriction on movement were undermining peacebuilding efforts and aggravating mental health issues in their communities.

Yet there was also optimism for the future. Many peacebuilders noted the opportunities provided by the crisis to advance peace, such as the upsurge in local mutual aid groups, and the chance to reconnect as a global community, while some also perceived the situation as an opportunity for local peacebuilders to take a leadership role in the prevention of violence.

While many peacebuilders were adapting their work to respond to the crisis in innovative ways, one of the main obstacles preventing them from being able to do so fully was a lack of access to the internet and digital tools.

Peace Direct recently highlighted the growing importance of digital technologies in peacebuilding activities around the world in its 'Digital Pathways to Peace' report based on a global consultation with peacebuilders and published in August 2020.[1] This found that 'technological innovation has been a powerful democratising force which has opened new avenues and spaces for civic participation and collective action, empowering marginalised voices and enhancing local accountability.'

The report also noted that 'increased connectivity has led to the development of powerful online communities, who are reshaping the social contract between state and citizenry and are providing key opportunities to build more inclusive and equitable societies.'[1]

1 To read the full 'Digital Pathways to Peace' report, please visit; https://www.peacedirect.org/publications/digital-pathways-for-peace/

Peacebuilders in the consultations expressed an urgent need for access to technological tools, knowledge, and other resources to adapt their work in the face of the global crisis.

As a result of this request, Peace Direct, Humanity United, Build Up, and Conducive Space for Peace launched 'Digital Inclusion for Peace,' an initiative designed to help local peacebuilders continue their essential role in building resilience in their communities during the pandemic.

'Digital Inclusion for Peace' offered vital digital support to peacebuilders by inviting them to apply for small grants through a 'Digital Inclusion Fund' (managed by Peace Direct) to purchase tech equipment and internet access; to take free online courses in 'digital peacebuilding' (managed by Build Up), and to connect with other peacebuilders on a purpose-built online platform (managed by Conducive Space for Peace), where they could share knowledge and collectively overcome challenges.

A digital platform for local peacebuilders, managed by Conducive Space for Peace

Following online consultations conducted by Conducive Space for Peace (CSP) in March and April 2020 to understand how local peacebuilders are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, several local actors expressed the need to remain virtually connected to their peers and to share useful information and resources among each other both within countries and across different country contexts. This led CSP to develop an online platform which by January 2021 had 500 members from 80 countries. 70% of current users of the platform are from the Global South and are actors working on diverse topics related to peacebuilding. Discussions on the platform have focused on sharing updates on the COVID-19 pandemic in-country contexts and how this impacts conflict and peace as well as sharing relevant articles on local peacebuilding and the pandemic. The platform has enabled access of users to two digital peacebuilding courses developed by Build Up, has facilitated four online networking and mentoring sessions among members, and has facilitated nine live-streamed discussions in different languages (French, Spanish, English) that drew on the interests of platform users, with the most recent discussion focusing on perspectives of local peacebuilders on the development of the COVID-19 vaccine.

ⓘ   local-peacebuilders-and-covid19.mn.co/

Digital peacebuilding courses provided by BuildUp

The Digital Adaptations course series is a set of introductory 'how to' guides designed primarily for local peacebuilders who are adapting standard peacebuilding activities to be delivered remotely, repurposing existing remote initiatives, or creating new digital peacebuilding programming to meet emergent needs. Peacebuilders can take these courses online on the Build Up course pages, via automated WhatsApp messaging, as well as on Conducive Space for Peace's online community platform. The content is deliberately bite-sized and adaptable to different platforms and settings, inviting others to share and build upon the material. The series begins with a foundational introductory course, "Digital Peacebuilding 101," offered in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic. An additional seven courses will complete the series, spanning topics from 'Remote Capacity Building' (available now), to Human-centered Peace Design, to Data for Peace, and more. To date, 698 people have participated in the online courses currently available, with an additional 118 accessing through WhatsApp.

ℹ️   howtobuildup.org/community-learning/courses-overview/

This report shares the successes, challenges, and lessons from the "Digital Inclusion Fund" pillar of the work, managed by Peace Direct, which ran from May to October 2020.

Over the fund's six-month lifespan, 233 peacebuilding individuals and organisations received grants of between $50 and $750 to purchase digital tools that would help them continue or adapt their work to build peace amidst the pandemic. The primary aim of the fund was to help local peacebuilders compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction with their communities and peers as a result of the lockdown restrictions imposed around the world.

However, findings from the survey of grantees showed that local peacebuilders were able to adapt and enhance their work to take advantage of digital technologies, opening up new forms of inclusion and peacebuilding methodologies that went beyond connecting with communities and peers during the crisis.

This report explores the rationale for creating this initiative, the implementation of the fund, its impact for local peacebuilders who received funding and most importantly, the learning that can be taken from the process.

Photo: a webinar on peacebuilding organised by Platfrom Africa.

The report draws on internal staff reflections on the process of implementing the fund, coupled with data collected from applications, including demographics, data collected from follow-up reports sent by grantees, and an after-action survey sent to all grantees and completed by 70% of them (164 grantees).

As a rapid response fund designed to support local peacebuilding organisations during the pandemic, the Digital Inclusion Fund was a success, both in terms of the number of grants disbursed and the impact of this funding for the local groups. For most people who benefitted from it, social distancing requirements would have made much of their work impossible had they not been able to adapt digitally.

Beyond this, the fund helped build peacebuilders' morale, many of whom reported that this was the first and only funding they had received during the pandemic. It helped them maintain access to vulnerable groups through online means, and in many cases to reach even more groups. Most importantly, it enabled peacebuilders to find new and creative ways of working to build peace.

Key findings and recommendations

Impact of digital grants

Analysis of how grants were used shows that there were seven distinct domains of activity and impact.

1

Providing opportunities for peacebuilders to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction with their staff, peers and constituencies, i.e. improving virtual communication and networking;

2

Helping peacebuilders adapt, innovate and improve their work;

3

Helping peacebuilders reach new communities and audiences through the internet and radio broadcasts;

4

Strengthening the early warning and early response capacities of local groups;

5

Helping local peacebuilders tackle Sexual and Gender based Violence, through providing virtual support networks, awareness raising campaigns, and help desks for those at risk;

6

Strengthening the mental wellbeing and resilience of local peacebuilders and their communities, by connecting them with others and reducing the sense of isolation;

7

Strengthening organisational sustainability by supporting the rapid onboarding of new digital skills as well as providing capital equipment which can be used for other programmes and activities.

These seven domains of change demonstrate the diverse ways in which local organisations benefitted from very modest funding.

Recommendation

Donors and INGOs should consider how technology can support and strengthen community cohesion and tackle violence and impunity through a broad range of approaches, and not just consider technology support as a way of improving communication.

Closing the digital divide

The majority of applicants to the Digital Inclusion Fund requested modest funding to enable them to purchase equipment so that they could access the internet, suggesting that lack of equipment is the biggest barrier to effective digital participation, not the cost of internet access.

Recommendation

Closing this 'digital divide' should be a priority for all donors and INGOs working with local civil society organisations, either through dedicated technology grants, or ringfenced budget lines within project budgets for technology.

Donors should also consider funding digital literacy programmes to support participation in online spaces for civil society organisations and in tech-based peacebuilding activities. These programmes should also include regional language groups to provide greater access to local communities around the world.

Effectiveness of rapid response small grants

Providing flexible small grants represents very good value for money. The Digital Inclusion Fund demonstrated that a modest investment of less than $1,000 per grantee can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of local peacebuilding efforts.

Local peacebuilders were able to adapt rapidly under challenging circumstances. Encouraging this innovative sprit may provide new and creative opportunities to address the root causes of violence.

Recommendation

Donors and INGOs should consider establishing rapid response small grant programmes during emergencies.

Participation & inclusion

Supporting access to technology for under-resourced and under-represented groups holds great promise for the advancement of more inclusive peacebuilding and human rights efforts globally.

Trust

Onerous donor due diligence and compliance processes currently exclude too many local civil society organisations from receiving international funding. Such bureaucratic hurdles have built up over time and reflect in part a mistrust of grassroots organisations, often unfairly considered by international donors to be more at risk of corruption and mismanagement.

" In a society where people sometimes struggle for a piece of bread, this fund was the biggest help for our organisation, so that we could easily carry out our peacebuilding and humanitarian work during the pandemic.

- Fund for Congolese Women, DRC

Recommendation

Donors and INGOs will need to adapt their grantmaking and partnership approaches, by establishing preferential access criteria and proactive searches to reach under-represented groups.

While this will increase digital participation and connectivity, genuine digital inclusion requires changes to online organising, activism ,and processes that provide opportunities for underrepresented groups to have a voice and to claim a digital space as their own.

Recommendation

Donors should modify their due diligence and compliance processes to respond to rapid onset emergencies. In particular trust-based approaches to due diligence can be effective and appropriate.

Photo: United Network of Youth for Peace and Diplomacy in Nigeria

Section 1
Impact of the Fund

Overview

The Digital Inclusion Fund received 2,084 applications in total, from applicants in 71 countries. The majority of applicants were from Africa (74.7%), followed by Asia (10.3%), Latin America and the Caribbean (9.9%), and finally Middle Eastern countries (5.2%).

The lack of applicants from outside Africa could be attributed to a number of factors including the lack of 'High/Very High Alert' countries outside Africa, as defined by the Fragile States Index, which was the criteria used to select priority countries. The lack of promotion of the fund in Latin America, Asia and the Middle East and the relatively stronger links that Peace Direct has to local peacebuilders in Africa compared to other countries are further factors.

In total, 233 grantees received funding totalling $149,196. Based on a survey carried out with grantees at the end of the implementation period, 114 (69.5%) out of 164 grantees who responded considered that the funding was 'extremely helpful' to their work while 50 (30.5%) considered that it was 'very helpful'. When asked how the funding was used, 54% reported that they purchased computers and internet equipment, 10% purchased mobile phones, 9% used their funds for internet access/airtime and 10% bought online conference facilities. 17% indicated that the funds were used for other digital tools and equipment.

Map of countries where Digitial Inclusion Fund grants were awarded.

How was funding used?

43% to enable remote working and to adapt digitally

35% to improve communication with communities

5% to launch a new initiative

13% to improve the quality of their work
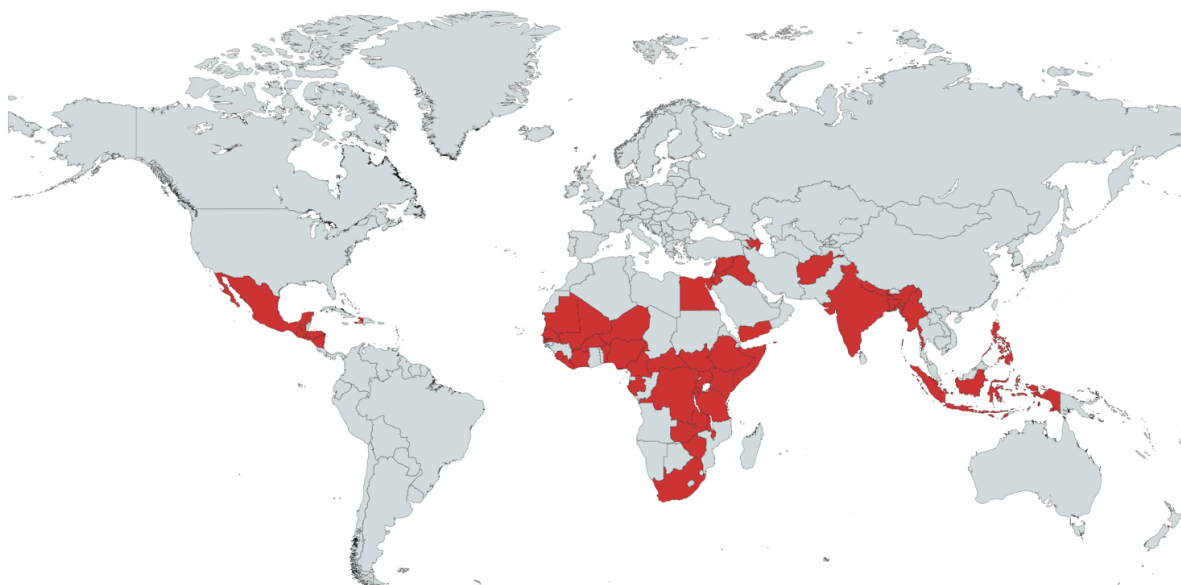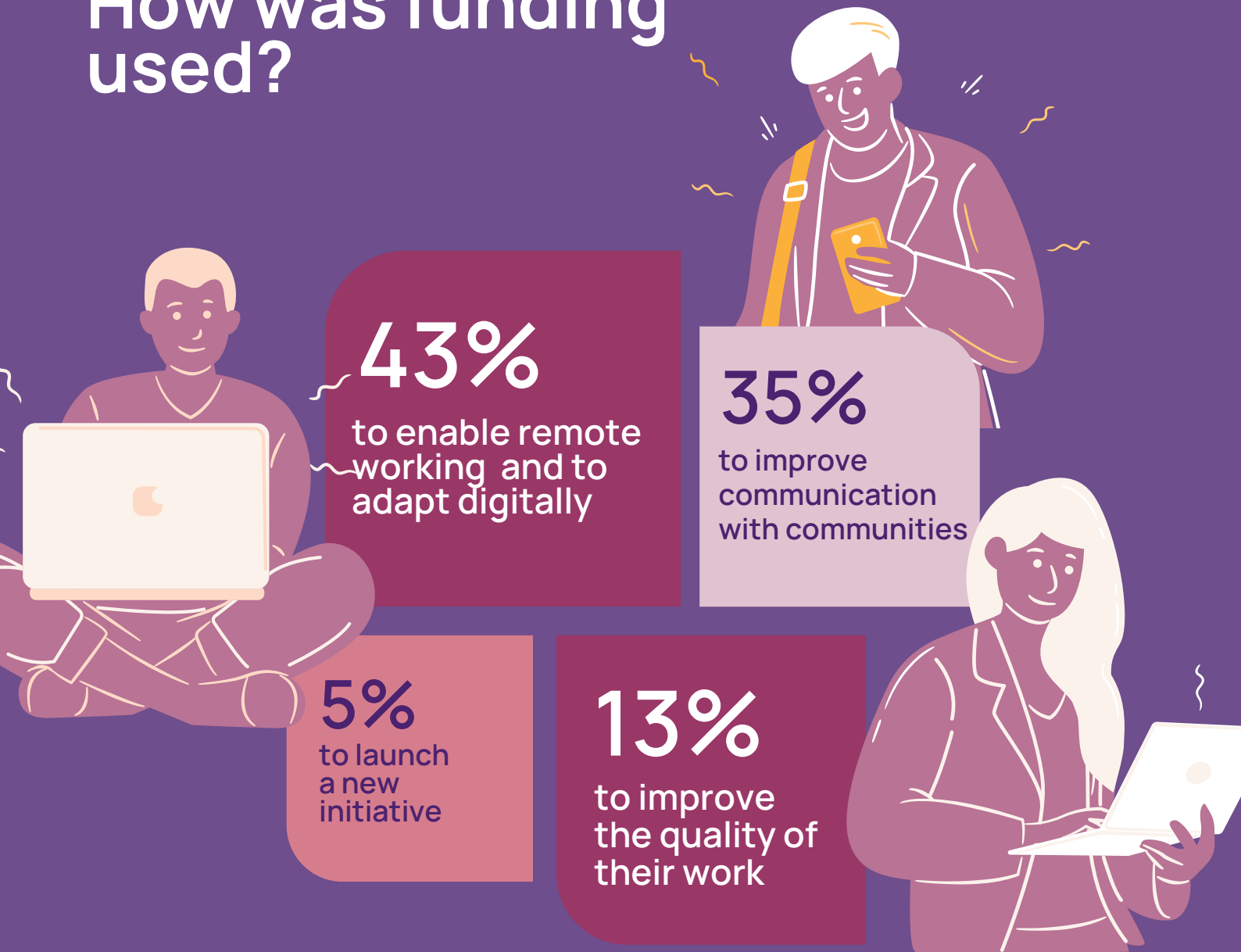
Recipients reported using the funding to purchase:

83% equipment
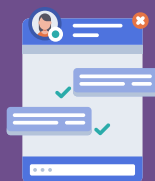
69% communications support
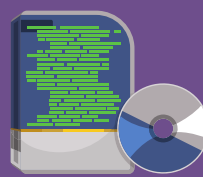
22% software

18% other

Who applied?

Figure 1: Applications by region

Latin America and the Caribbean
6%

Middle East
2%

Asia
9%

Africa
83%
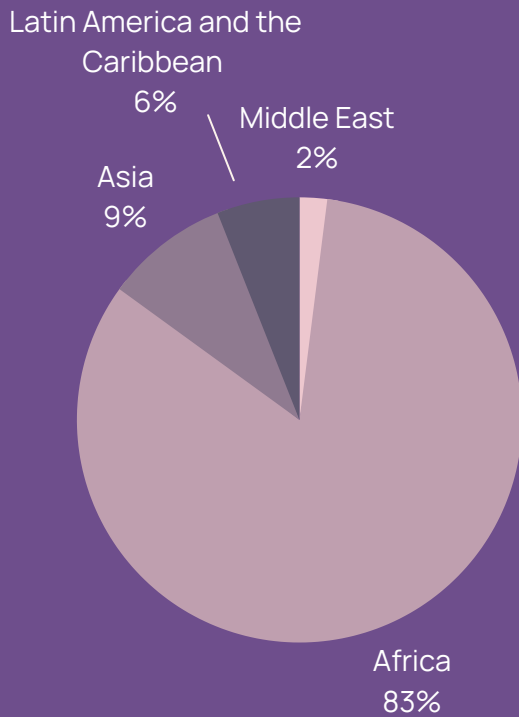
Figure 2: Applications by language

Arabic
2%

Spanish
5%

French
13%

English
80%
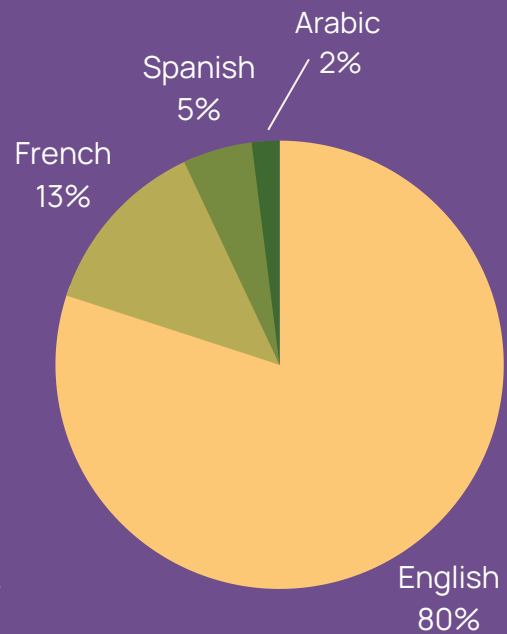
Figure 3: Applications by gender

Other
3%

Non-binary
4%

Women
32%

Men
61%
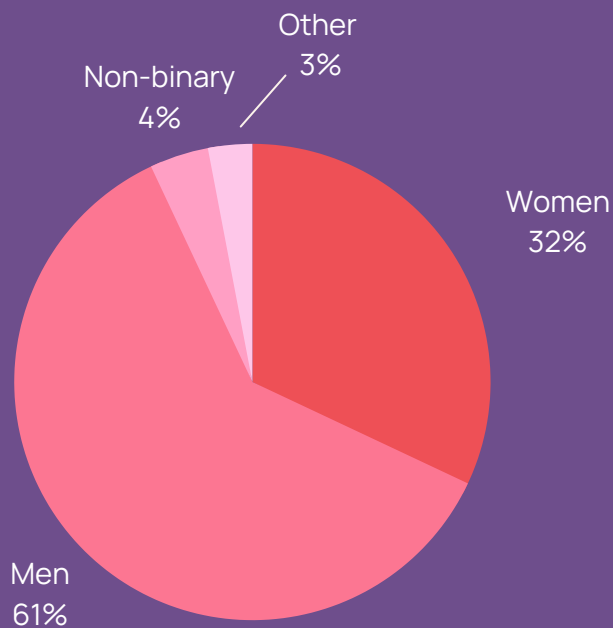
Who applied?

Figure 4: Applications by age

Age	
14-18	
19-25	
26-35	
36-50	
Over 50	

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%
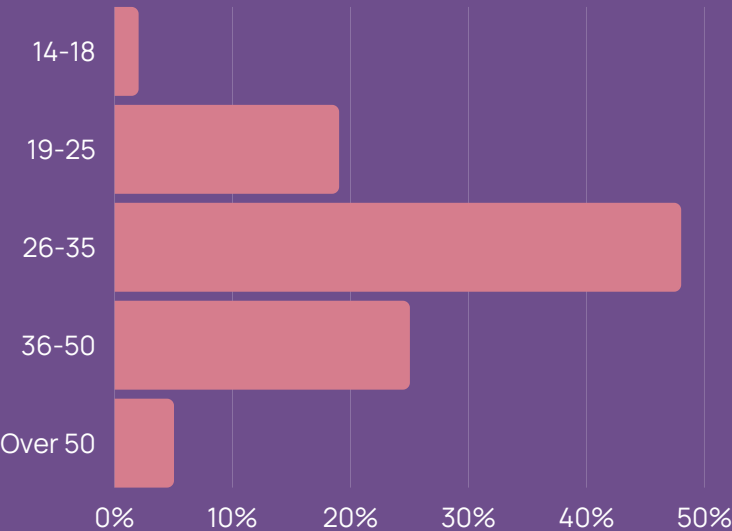
Figure 5: Applications by top 5 countries

500
400
300
200
100
0

Nigeria Uganda Kenya DRC Cameroon
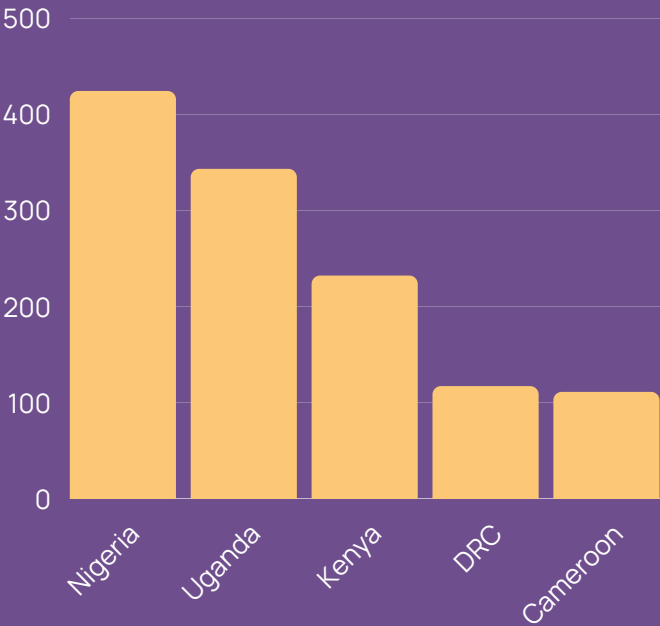
Figure 6: Applications by disability

Disabled

Not disabled

0% 25% 50% 75% 100%
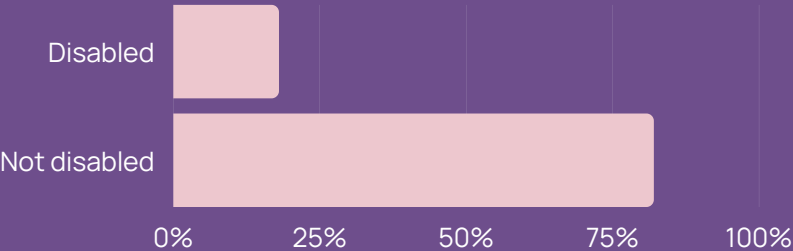
1.1 Impact for local peacebuilders

The acquisition of digital tools enabled local peacebuilders to continue to adapt their work, despite the COVID-19 restrictions.

According to the survey 92% of respondents indicated that COVID-19 had disrupted their work either 'a great deal' or 'a lot.'

"

"When the COVID-19 happened our phones were ringing like never before, women and children under attack, violence cases rising at a very high rate, land conflicts were increasing each minute and we had no way of reaching out to them or even helping them. We had no phone credit support let alone any way to raise our voice and help the mediators continue with their work."

- Foundation for Integrated Rural Development

Purchasing digital tools and accessing the internet was essential for peacebuilders to adapt through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Digital Inclusion Fund enabled grantees to continue their work remotely and adapt or strengthen it digitally.

Grassroots organisations used technology to better support conflict-affected communities. Phones and internet connection facilitated continued communication despite it being impossible to meet in person.

Technology also helped create online spaces where peacebuilders could gain and share knowledge and skills about violence prevention and conflict mediation. Many designed and conducted online training on financial management, administration, conflict resolution, and psychosocial support.

"

"The new laptop is allowing us to overcome some of the difficulties we are having with working virtually and remain in contact with the women who depend on us for reliable information, messaging, and emotional support. Having a new piece of equipment that works, is fast and reliable, is really helping us keep pace with the communications needed for all aspects of our work."

- Fund for Congolese Women

The tools purchased with the Fund helped grantees mediate conflicts and reconcile communities before they took a dramatic turn. With the spread of hate speech and fake news online, a stronger presence of local peacebuilders on social media is essential to provide verified and accurate information and therefore defuse tensions. In Cameroon for example, one of the grantees, who chose to remain anonymous for safety reasons, shared with us the following story:

"

"A conflict between farmers and herders arose over crops destroyed by cattle. Against the backdrop of the anglophone crisis, it was deemed necessary to intervene to prevent an escalation of violence. We had set up two reconciliation platforms based in the North Eastern communities to bring peace, to whom we provided two phones purchased with the Digital Inclusion Fund. With phones, we provided necessary technical backup, coaching and mentoring to the platform members in charge of resolving the dispute. We advised them to meet the leaders of the two communities and discuss with them on individual bases, which they did. The mediation process led by the platforms, supported by us via phone, helped resolve the conflict: compensation was agreed upon for farmers whose crops got destroyed."

- Anonymous

1.2 Pioneering peace: Local peacebuilders found innovative ways to foster peace and security

Through the Digital Inclusion Fund, local groups and individuals fostered peace in new and creative ways. Having to adapt to a new environment forced them to think outside the box and innovate.

Many peacebuilders were relying on physical gatherings prior to the pandemic. Restrictions forced them to rethink the way peace could be implemented. Some of the grantees utilised technology to advance peace for the first time with the Digital Inclusion Fund.

Instead of conducting research and interviews in person, some peacebuilders who fight against sexual and gender-based violence conducted virtual mapping of women and girl survivors in their region. Many scheduled meetings with local authorities using phones and Whatsapp to coordinate responses to instances of violence.

Photo: The Youth Empowerment Foundation in Uganda conducted a digital literacy training for teachers using the wifi router purchased with the Digital Inclusion Fund. This training helped them find, use, and share online resources whilst learning about hate speech messaging online.

Others learned how to use a camera to create a collection of short videos about peace, later shared with their communities online or via Whatsapp to bolster their resilience during difficult times.

In Kenya for instance, the Digital Inclusion Fund helped gather life-saving information for communities, creating the link between victims and the police:

"

"We gave solar-powered and satellite-enabled phones to 15 peace advocates, so they could warn communities early when violent conflict was arising, and so that they could relay important security alerts to the authorities. We are starting to receive feedback from various stakeholders confirming the positive impact of the initiative."

- SIXKNM Self-Help group in Kenya

Many Digital Inclusion Fund grantees conducted activities that either targeted youth or were led by young people. Growing up in a world where technology was ubiquitous, it was only logical for them to use new ICT tools as a means to amplify their scope, networks, and outreach.

Youth played a crucial part in information dissemination during this crisis using different online platforms.

By supporting them to improve their skills at both individual and organisational levels, the Fund helped young peacebuilders become better agents of peace, making them more effective, independent, and able to make their own decisions.

Photo: Declares Inspirational Group Kenya, producing a radio show on peace and justice.

1.3 New Information and Communications Technologies

New Information and Communications Technologies enabled peacebuilders to reach and support more people, strengthen their communications, and in many cases, increase inclusive participation to peace and social cohesion.

For many peacebuilders, the funding enabled them to reach even greater numbers of people through digital means.

Peacebuilders used the tools to hold online conferences and webinars, to set up social media accounts, and to use radio and other digital platforms to share information and start conversations.

Through digital platforms, peacebuilders were able to spread awareness messages on the pandemic and on the need for peace more widely among their communities and reach new audiences:

"

"The webinars we organised were on topical issues such as peacebuilding - arts in peace, mental health, and an entire COVID-19 summit... [we] reached over 11,000 people on social media, inspiring actions, awareness, and supporting the role and power of the community in times of crisis."

- Platform Africa

Peacebuilders also took the opportunity of having tech equipment and internet access to develop their communications and visibility online. They created or improved websites, launching online campaigns and using powerful online messaging on Facebook:

"Being a new organisation, we need to be visible enough to attract support and to be felt within our catchment communities. With limited funds we had developed and launched a website however the quality was too low. With the funding we have been able to upgrade it and now the quality is up-to-date and allows us to share our work more easily with all features."

– Africa Center For Nonviolence and Sustainable Impact

Developing an online presence and using digital platforms allowed some peacebuilders to make their work more inclusive of diverse groups, for instance by translating complex messages into local languages, directly targeting marginalised communities and strengthening the skills of young disabled people in conflict prevention.

"At the beginning of the pandemic, we lost contact with our recipients that come from low-income sectors and with those who are more prone to violence and drug trafficking, as our organization continued its work online. Thanks to the fund, children and families that we serve, especially those with the poorest resources, did not have their activities interrupted, which are designed to prevent addictions, combat violence, and hinder the recruitment of minors to criminal gangs."

- Transformación Social, AC, TRASO, Mexico

Additionally, supporting digital inclusion paved the way for horizontal collaboration and partnerships between local groups. Many peacebuilders facilitated meetings with peer organisations to collectively deal with instances of violence in their communities and learn about best practices globally.

From Facebook Live to Zoom conferences, Information and Communications Technology helped connect people across borders, enabling advice to pass from one continent to another, expanding dialogue and increasing shared knowledge.

1.4 Enhancing effectiveness

Peacebuilders used funds to enhance the effectiveness of efforts to rapidly respond to outbreaks of violence.

In times of crisis, digital technologies are a critical tool to prevent outbreaks of violence and respond swiftly to rising tensions between communities. In contexts where judicial institutions are fragile and where the state security apparatus is underfunded, inefficient or is the main perpetrator of violence, cases of human rights abuses have dramatically increased. Often, governments took advantage of the international focus on preventing the spread of the pandemic to further quash dissent, arrest human rights defenders, and tighten their grip on power. Against this backdrop, local peacebuilders stepped up to protect civilians.[2] The Digital Inclusion Fund helped them play this vital role.

By purchasing phones, internet bundles, laptops and cameras, peacebuilders built new or strengthened existing Early Warning and Early Response systems.

They were able to receive information about cases of violence in real time, collect and triangulate data remotely, and record and report abuses. Most organisations work with focal points based in different locations in order to cover larger areas. These focal points monitored and shared instances of violence in volatile environments thanks to phone credits purchased with the Digital Inclusion Fund.

In some cases, community mediators were able to intervene faster or refer cases to the police when needed, while phones were used to create and train peace clubs in emergency situations to foster dialogue between opposing communities.

As such, technology is a fundamental underpinning of human rights monitoring in the digital age.

2 Amy Lieberman, "COVID-19 is not an 'excuse' for human rights violations, UN human rights chief says", Devex, 02/10/2020. Accessible on: ttps://www.devex.com/news/covid-19-is-not-an-excuse-for-human-rights-violations-un-human-rights-chief-says-98192. (Accessed on 21/12/2020)

Case study

Anonymous grantee in Nigeria

The pandemic took us by surprise; containment measures such as lockdowns and social distancing meant that we could no longer work our usual way, we could not do any more physical trainings as planned. We had only completed one workshop out of the six planned, before we had to shut down operations.

The Grant helped us take our trainings online, ensuring that we continued to work on our project of teambuilding and gathering relevant data for our work on police brutality.

We were able to support our trainees with internet data which is very expensive here. With the Zoom Pro account and breakout rooms, we could ensure that our training sessions remained interactive and collaborative, as they would have in a physical setting.

This support was also crucial in the conceptualisation of our incident reporting tool on police brutality which we are currently developing. Thanks to this grant, we can completely say that we now have the capacity to work online, a new normal that we have come to embrace.

Photo: Women Wage Peace, Israel: Women-led network discuss women leading peacebuilding efforts between Israel and Palestine.

1.5 Curbing sexual and gender-based violence

The funding helped local peacebuilders curb the spread of sexual and gender-based violence.

COVID-19 exacerbated existing forms of violence, often worsening challenging situations for vulnerable people. During periods of lockdown, media across the world reported a dramatic surge in domestic violence. With the closure of schools and businesses, many women and girls found themselves confined under the same roof as their perpetrators, economically fragile and physically endangered.

This situation led to increased cases of forceful disappearance, rapes, killing and child trafficking, with national governments often unprepared to address the issues.[3]

As such, the role of local peacebuilders, especially women, was vital to support the people most in need. Women are often seen as victims of violence but not always as active and effective peacebuilders, despite United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security which called for greater participation of women in peace processes and peace initiatives. Yet, at the forefront of the crisis, women and girls used technology to mainstream women's rights, fight against gender-based violence and raise awareness about the role that women can play in peacebuilding through virtual engagement, webinars, and online campaigns.

3 Unwomen.org. 2020. COVID-19 And Ending Violence Against Women And Girls. [online] Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006> [Accessed 10 December 2020]. Amy Lieberman, "COVID-19 is not an 'excuse' for human rights violations, UN human rights chief says", Devex, 02/10/2020. Accessible on : https://www.devex.com/news/covid-19-is-not-an-excuse-for-human-rights-violations-un-human-rights-chief-says-98192.
(Accessed on 21/12/2020)

Photo: Hope for a better future, based in Cameroon, recording a community awareness program on Gender-Based Violence, peacebuilding, and health in the local language.

By connecting with women using mobile phones or online conversations, local peacebuilders empowered them and encouraged their active participation in peace and violence reduction as demonstrated by a Cameroonian recipient of the Digital Inclusion Fund, who chose to remain anonymous:

"

"This grant enabled my team to intensify our peace campaigns and thanks to this support my community has learned to live in solidarity (...). In Kumbo, 25 young boys, whose mothers participated to our peace talks and learned about their role in peacebuilding, laid down their arms. Their mothers convinced them. This inspired many other women in other communities to talk about peace and participate in peace building. We are confident that this grant will leave a remarkable mark in peace processes in our conflict affected community."

- Anonymous

In the face of the global spike in violence against women and girls, local peacebuilders used technology to support survivors of violence, collect their stories, report their cases to relevant authorities, and provide medical, psychological, and legal assistance.

As meeting in person was limited in most countries under COVID-19 restrictions, the funds enabled them to monitor and report cases and map the survivors. Local peacebuilders reached out to survivors with purchased mobile phones and phone credit, connecting them with healing professionals and lawyers.

Online advocacy was also a powerful tool to launch awareness-raising campaigns, bringing national attention to the issue of localised gender-based violence.

Photo: Camp for Peace Liberia purchased radios and batteries to broadcast their peacebuilding programmes to young people in rural areas remaining at home due to the pandemic.

"

"A girl in Isiulu Village who was forced into sexual slavery during this COVID-19 period was referred to us just through a phone call. We followed up on the case through phone calls and made a lot of noise through digital campaigns for this girl to receive justice. Right now, this girl has been taken to a safe house and the perpetrators for this sex slavery are in court to face charges soon."

- One More Percent, Kenya.

Safeguarding women's rights and participation in peacebuilding also implies protecting women peacebuilders. Digital tools can reduce potential threats to female staff's safety, who do not need to travel long distances anymore to join a meeting point, especially at night, as mentioned by a member of Camp for Peace Liberia:

"

"With the help of the funds, we were able to purchase sound recording instruments to self-produce programs on Peace Building, Gender-based violence and COVID-19 in local languages to be broadcasted by local radios. This has also drastically reduced production cost that we normally spend in recording studio. It has further helped protect our staff especially the female ones who used to travel long distances at midnight to record programs as commercial recording studios preferred night-time recording to limit background noise."

- Camp for Peace, Liberia.

Foundation for Integrated Rural Development, Uganda

Foundation for Integrated Rural Development (FIRD) is a women-led non–profit organisation based in Northern Uganda, working towards the prevention of violence against women and children. They strive to improve communities' livelihoods and help them create a society free of human rights abuse and violations.

As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to grow, FIRD's grassroots network of peacebuilders focused on strengthening skills, reflecting on the challenges brought by the crisis, and helping communities break cycles of violent conflicts.

With the Digital Inclusion Fund, they purchased phone credit, internet access, and radio airtime. These tools allowed them to conduct four talk shows, giving peacebuilders the opportunity to engage with the community on issues they are experiencing, including land conflicts and violence against women and girls, issues that have been exacerbated by COVID-19. FIRD invited a female clan leader to take part in two radio talk shows where she and FIRD's Executive Director discussed peacebuilding efforts and how to best adapt to change.

Additionally, phone credits were used by staff members to assist survivors and victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence. The fund also supported their advocacy efforts and the promotion of social cohesion between communities.

Photo: Female clan leader and peacebuilder discussion during the interactive community radio talk show facilitated by FIRD on women's land rights in times of COVID-19.

> "As a result of this engagement, we were also able to raise some additional funds to support our advocacy work and the efforts of the women mediators with the wider community. The funds also supported the peacebuilders' online mediation and counselling through the phones. All I can say is thank you for believing in small community-based organisations and supporting us to continue with our peacebuilding to further ensure peace exists in the unknown spaces and communities by the unknown peacebuilders. Thanks for trusting us and helping us when we had no one to turn to for support."

1.6 Mental health

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a significant, negative impact on mental health for many. Isolation, fear of the disease, deaths, and daily negative news stories have increased levels of anxiety and caused or exacerbated cases of depression and trauma.[4]

Living in conflict affected areas, local peacebuilders were confronted with particularly stressful situations where armed violence overlapped with a rapid onset health emergency and persistent economic deprivation. With donors and international NGOs scaling back funding and operations in most contexts,[5] grassroots organisations feared for the complete closure of their programmes and the discontinuation of support to communities in need. The lack of financial and digital capacity took a toll on their motivation and ability to engage efficiently.

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"Before this grant we were worried about how we would continue our peacebuilding work. (...) Mediators, myself and the team were experiencing mental and emotional breakdown. We knew we needed help ourselves and for the help the women and girls experiencing gender-based violence, but we had no way. Not until a friend (a peacebuilder) from the USA shared this fund.

This was the only grant that we got through this time of COVID-19, as most of the funding proposals available said were open to everyone even the community-based organisations, but the reality is that most of the funds went to the big and well-connected organisations which we could not compete with.

When I received this grant all I remember there were tears in my eyes as I knew I was able to stay connected with the grassroot structures but also help the women and girls in the rural hard-to-reach communities, who were experiencing sexual, physical and mental violence and trauma."

- Foundation for Integrated Rural Development

Local peacebuilders worked tirelessly to improve the mental wellbeing of communities during the pandemic, using technology to do so. Since mental health is taboo in many cultures, it was key to normalise discussions around it and raise awareness about its implications and consequences.

Organisations and individuals used creative ways to do this, by broadcasting shows on emotional wellbeing on the radio, distributing 'emotional first aid kits' through digital means, and offering counselling sessions via zoom or phone. Some peacebuilders created online support groups and linked therapists to patients.

4 Nirmita Panchal, The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use, Available at: https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/

5 BOND, How is Covid-19 affecting NGOs' finances and operations? Available at: https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2020/04/how-is-covid-19-affecting-ngos-finances-and-operations. Accessed on December 12, 2020
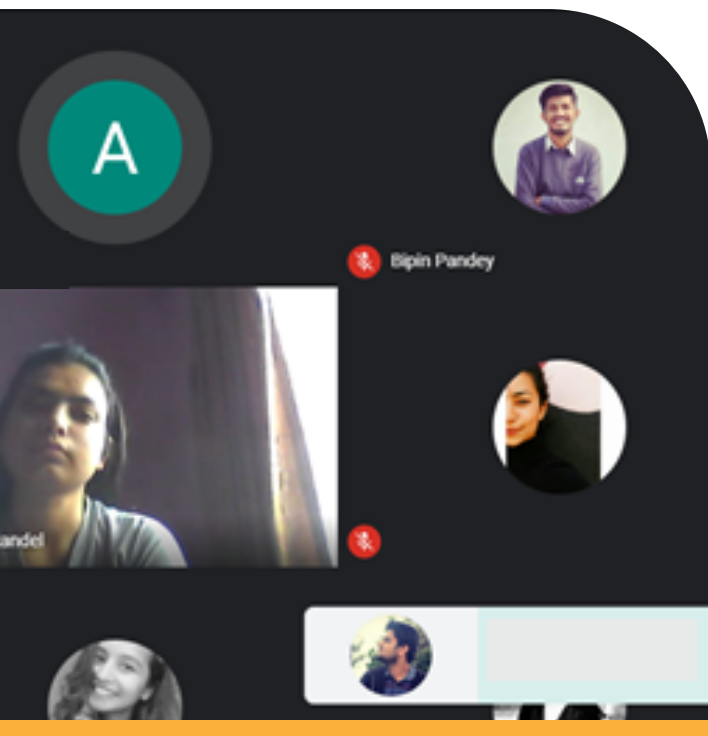
Photo: an awareness session conducted by We for Change Nepal on the importance of emotional and psychological health, and ways to overcome depression and mental health issues

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Under the project 'Depression doesn't have a face' and with the help of this grant, we provided an Emotional First Aid kit to around 500 young people in Nepal to take care of their emotional and psychological health during the crisis. The First Aid Kit helped raise awareness about the causes of stress and depression, such as excessive social media, its impact and ways to overcome depression.

- We for Change, Nepal

1.8 Sustainable organisations

Thanks to the digital tools purchased, peacebuilders were able to carry out activities and mobilise members of their communities despite COVID-19 restrictions, learning valuable skills for the long term. They improved the quality of their work by accessing new digital tools and by fostering collaboration.

Organisations used funds to raise their profile locally and sometimes nationally. For many grantees the digital tools helped them address issues in contexts where the state was unwilling or unable to provide assistance, especially for the most marginalised. Airtime and internet were used to raise awareness about different issues on social media, including Facebook and Whatsapp, engage with communities online, and stir up virtual debates.

With the relevant equipment, grantees strengthened their capacity in-house and reduced costs on communication and reporting, allowing them to invest their money elsewhere.

Photo: a recording session led by MasterPeace, Mexico.

Furthermore, the use of technology strengthened the capacity of local peacebuilders to conduct their work through online skills training, that were then cascaded down to other members of their organisations, using Zoom subscriptions and paying for participants' internet access to join the sessions. The skills will ultimately increase the effectiveness of local peacebuilding and response to crisis.

Importantly, technology can also contribute to financial sustainability. Grassroots organisations and individuals often struggle to secure funds, with most international funding going to INGOs. COVID-19 aggravated this imbalance, leaving many local groups high and dry.[6] Furthermore, the way that most funding is provided to organisations tends to be highly projectised and inflexible, leaving many organisations unable to modify their budgets to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

6 Jennifer Lentfer, Five reasons funding should go directly to local NGOs, The Guardian, November 2015. Accessible on: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/nov/13/five-reasons-funding-should-go-directly-to-local-ngos

Photo: Platform Africa

Section 2
Fund design & management

2.1 Fund design

The Digital Inclusion Fund was launched on May 20th 2020, just one month after the publication of the 'COVID-19 and local peacebuilding' report.[7]

Funding was provided by Humanity United, a US-based Foundation which is part of the Shift Power for Peace initiative. This enabled decisions between the three collaborating organisations to convert to implementation very quickly, as funding could be committed by Humanity United within days, rather than the typical donor response times of months. This was extremely important, given the rapid onset of the pandemic and the needs articulated by peacebuilders in the global consultation. In particular, the disruption caused by the pandemic exposed a stark 'digital divide' between activists in the Global North and South. This divide was raised by local peacebuilders in an earlier global consultation held by Peace Direct in March 2020 which focused on the use of digital technologies for peace.

Key findings of the consultation concluded:

- Structural barriers such as poverty, weak infrastructure, and low digital literacy – critical factors that inhibit socio-economic transformation – are preventing large segments of the global population from accessing digital technologies. Poor infrastructure development, prohibitive costs, and a lack of accessibility and training have contributed to widening social inequalities that are leaving many behind.

- These digital divides are disproportionately affecting marginalised groups such as women and minorities.

Underlying gendered norms and power imbalances replicated in online spaces have translated into continued harassment and targeting by spoilers and trolls, further undermining these groups' representation in online platforms.

- Restrictive regulatory and policy environments – characterised by censorship, surveillance and sporadic internet shutdowns – are threatening users' freedom and rights, and are contributing to shrinking civil society space.

7 Conducive Spaces for Peace, Humanity United, Peace Direct 'COVID-19 and local peacebuilding' April 2020. Available at https://www.peacedirect.org/publications/covid19andpeacebuilding/

The Digital Inclusion Fund was set up to help bridge these divides by enabling local peacebuilders to access to the digital tools needed to adapt their work during COVID-19 travel restrictions. The following considerations informed the design of the fund:

Accessibility and inclusion:

The fund was designed specifically to cater to small organisations (as well as individual applicants) that often are not able to access funds from the international community due to onerous due diligence requirements such as audited accounts, long track records, and an ability to manage large grants. These barriers as well as the less reported but pervasive fears of fraud, misuse of funds, and concerns about 'lack of capacity,' which often have their roots in structural racism, have effectively excluded most local peacebuilding organisations from international funding opportunities.

The grants were kept deliberately small, ranging from $50 to $750, to discourage large organisations from applying and to respond to the need articulated in the global consultations held in April that local peacebuilders needed rapid access to funding so that they could get online as well as purchase IT equipment.

Applications were reviewed on a rolling basis and the application form was available in four languages – French, Spanish, English and Arabic - to make the Fund as accessible as possible.

The application form was developed in-house as an online web form and the questions were kept to a minimum, to ensure that the form could be completed easily. All questions were assigned a score range, with stronger answers receiving the maximum score while weaker answers were given a partial score, for example 0.5 points instead of one full point.

Peace Direct staff were trained on how to assess applications to ensure consistency in marking. Each application was reviewed by two members of staff and the DIF lead then moderated the scores in cases where there were big discrepancies between the two scores. All scoring and moderation took place on an in-house designed 'back-end' of the webform which was accessible by all scorers regardless of location. The fund was also open to individuals and additional questions were asked from individual applicants. Applicants could also be nominated by a third party.

To support the inclusion of typically underrepresented groups in such funding opportunities, applications from women's led groups, groups working with disabled people and those working in rural areas received additional points in the scoring system.

Eligibility criteria:

Applicants had to demonstrate that they did some form of peacebuilding work in order to be eligible for funding, even if they did not identify as a peacebuilding organisation. A holistic definition of 'peacebuilding' was provided on the application form, to be as inclusive as possible.

Applicants that did receive funding from international partners were eligible, though it was hoped that the size of the grants would discourage larger organisations from applying. Second, it was decided that only applicants from certain countries would initially be eligible, based on the 2019 Fragile States Index, to ensure that those based in the most conflict-affected countries would benefit the most. Initially, applicants from countries marked as "High Warning," "Alert," "High Alert," and "Very High Alert" in the Fragile States Index were considered.

However, mid-way through the implementation of the fund, applicants from countries with an "Elevated Warning" were also included due to the lower than expected response from peacebuilders in Latin America, with most countries on the continent not fitting into the higher risk criteria.

Due diligence:

Instead of asking for documentation to satisfy due diligence requirements, the fund adopted a trust-based process. This implied not asking for compliance documents from applicants (financial or administrative) and only verifying the work of the organisation or the individual through their social media presence or website and by requesting references from peers.

In doing so, the standard approach to due diligence was reversed. The onus was on Peace Direct staff to assess an applicants' suitability by triangulating information received from the reference with the web and social media presence of each applicant.

This approach enabled hundreds of applicants who did not meet the typical eligibility criteria for most grantmakers to apply for funding.

However, the limitations of such an approach were also evident early on. For example, it relied on applicants to have a social media presence of some description and a referee that could vouch for them. While this didn't prove difficult for the vast majority of organisational applicants (since even the smallest organisations had a presence on Facebook), it was much more difficult for individual applicants to prove the existence of their work through a social media presence. To address this, additional questions were asked of individual applicants, and two referees were requested to compensate for the lack of web presence.

As a reference from a peer was an important part of the due diligence process, applicants that did not provide any reference were not scored. Before confirming any grant, sanctions lists were checked to ensure that applicants were not linked to any proscribed groups.

2.2 Fund management

The fund had an initial $100,000 to disburse, though due to the overwhelming demand from local peacebuilders, additional funding was secured to increase the total grant pot to $150,000.

One member of Peace Direct's staff team in London was given overall responsibility for the implementation of the fund. Most Peace Direct staff were enlisted as scorers, with a decision to review applications weekly rather than setting a specific deadline each month, to be as responsive as possible. An internal DIF working group was assembled, comprising the Project lead, CEO, Communications Officer, and Research Manager.

An in-house designed online platform displayed every application submitted in real time, which allowed staff to follow daily the number of new applicants, check which applications were yet to receive a reference or a score and what score each applicant received. Further refinements were made later so that automatic reminders were sent to referees. A grantee tracking system was also established to help give staff a better sense of the total amount granted each week.

When the fund launched, it was not clear how many applicants would submit a proposal via the online portal. However, it soon became clear that the number of applicants was well in excess of the staffing that had been put in place to manage the fund. Over the course of the five months, over 2,000 applications were received, almost 100 per week on average. This posed significant logistical challenges in keeping up with the sheer volume of applications. To address this, two paid interns were recruited to support the administration of the fund. While a decision not to allocate funding to recruit an additional member of staff was made early on (in part to protect as much funding for local groups and because the fund was designed to last 3-5 months), in hindsight this was a planning error as staff were overwhelmed with the increased demand and struggled to maintain the levels of responsiveness that were planned at the outset.

For example, it was hoped that applications in one week could be reviewed the following week to provide the quickest possible turnaround. However, due to a backlog of applications that built up soon after the launch of the fund, the typical turnaround time was 3-4 weeks. While this is still fast by international standards, it fell short of Peace Direct's internal expectations. In addition, due to the increased volume of applications, it was clear early on that it would not be possible to provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants, which was regrettable.

Challenges and lessons learned during implementation

Applying via WhatsApp:

Since the project was created to provide digital tools to peacebuilders, developing an online application implied that applicants had some access to internet and to a working computer or smartphone in the first place, which may have excluded some peacebuilders. An attempt was made to address this by designing a WhatsApp application form, but due to a lack of internal capacity, this idea was abandoned.

Short timeframe and fast pace:

This project was developed within a very short timeframe. This meant not only that staff were learning as they were implementing, but also that they had little time to correct mistakes since applications were being received continuously for 22 weeks. This fast pace process also left little time for follow up with grantees and applicants, to answer requests, and to focus on developing an effective evaluation process.

For example, some unsuccessful applicants also contacted Peace Direct to express their disappointment that they had not received feedback on their application; feedback that wasn't possible given the volume of applications.

Efficient human resourcing:

Once it became clear that the fund was attracting a far greater number of applications than the staff were able to deal with, a decision should have been made to expand the human resources to support the fund.

Finances:

Managing large volumes of small grants was a significant logistical challenge. While payment services such as Western Union were used for many of the grants, the processing of payments was time consuming and inefficient. For example, approximately one quarter of all transfers were initially rejected by the banking provider/s because recipient banking information was incorrect.

A useful but imperfect website:

The website was intuitive and well-built for this project, but could have been improved with additional time. For instance, once the application was submitted, it was impossible for grantees to make any changes such as changing the name or email address of their referee. Hundreds of emails were received from applicants wishing to make small changes, and these had to be done manually by staff.

A lack of participatory methodology:

Peace Direct aims to move away from funding approaches which involve only Peace Direct staff holding power and making decisions about grants as we aim to embrace and support a more participatory grantmaking practice which redistributes power and control. However, given the rapid and responsive nature of this fund and the time takes to design and implement participatory grantmaking, it was not possible to design a more participatory process, for example allowing local committees to decide which applicants to fund.

Photo: **Master Peace, Mexico**

Section 3
Findings & Recommendations

3.1 Key findings & recommendations

This report demonstrates how digital tools can play a pivotal role in building peace across the world, especially in times of crisis. In an increasingly connected world, local peacebuilders are able to adapt to rapidly changing contexts when provided the means to do so.

They used technology to launch awareness-raising campaigns about COVID-19 prevention, mediate intercommunity conflicts virtually, and respond rapidly to instances of violence against civilians.

The introduction of digital platforms, such as Zoom and Facebook Live, tend to dissolve the territorial and technical boundaries that limit access to, and sharing of, knowledge for local peacebuilders, needed to effectively promote social cohesion and provide non-violent solutions to conflicts. Increased connectivity multiplies opportunities for dialogue and exchanges on best practices, contributing to sustainable peace.

Designing and implementing the "Digital Inclusion Fund" initiative allowed us to reach the following conclusions:

Impact of digital grants:

Analysis of how grants were used shows that there were seven distinct domains of activity and impact.

(1) Providing opportunities for peacebuilders to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction with their staff, peers, and constituencies, i.e. improving virtual communication and networking;

(2) Helping peacebuilders adapt, innovate, and improve their work;

(3) Helping peacebuilders reach new communities and audiences through the internet and radio broadcasts;

(4) Strengthening the early warning and early response capacities of local groups;

5) Helping local peacebuilders tackle Sexual and Gender based Violence through providing virtual support networks, awareness raising campaigns, and help desks for those at risk.

(6) Strengthening the mental wellbeing and resilience of local peacebuilders and their communities by connecting them with others and reducing the sense of isolation;

(7) Strengthening organisational sustainability by supporting the rapid onboarding of new digital skills as well as providing capital equipment, which can be used for other programmes and activities.

These seven domains of change demonstrate the diverse ways in which local organisations benefitted from very modest funding.

Recommendation

Donors and INGOs should consider how technology can support and strengthen community cohesion as well as tackle violence and impunity through a broad range of approaches, and not just consider technology support as a way of improving communication.

Closing the digital divide:

The majority of applicants to the Digital Inclusion Fund requested modest funding to enable them to purchase equipment so that they could access the internet, suggesting that lack of equipment is the biggest barrier to effective digital participation, not the cost of internet access. Closing this 'digital divide' should be a priority for all donors and INGOs working with local civil society organisations, either through dedicated technology grants, or ringfenced budget lines within project budgets for technology.

Recommendation

Donors should also consider funding digital literacy programmes to support participation in online spaces for civil society organisations and in tech-based peacebuilding activities. These programmes should also include regional language groups to provide greater access to local communities around the world.

Effectiveness of rapid response small grants:

Providing flexible small grants represents very good value for money. The Digital Inclusion Fund demonstrated that a modest investment of less than $1,000 per grantee can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of local peacebuilding efforts. Local peacebuilders were able to adapt rapidly under challenging circumstances. Encouraging this innovative sprit may provide new and creative opportunities to address the root causes of violence.

Recommendation

Donors and INGOs should consider establishing rapid response small grant programmes during emergencies.

Participation and inclusion:

Supporting access to technology for under-resourced and under- represented groups holds great promise for the advancement of more inclusive peacebuilding and human rights efforts globally.

Recommendation

Donors and INGOs will need to adapt their grantmaking and partnership approaches, by establishing preferential access criteria and proactive searches to reach under-represented groups.

While this will increase digital participation and connectivity, genuine digital inclusion requires changes to online organising, activism, and processes that provides opportunities for underrepresented groups to have a voice and to claim a digital space as their own.

Trust:

Onerous donor due diligence and compliance processes currently exclude too many local civil society organisations from receiving international funding. Such bureaucratic hurdles have built up over time and reflect in part a mistrust of grassroots organisations, often unfairly considered by international donors to be more at risk of corruption and mismanagement.

Recommendation:

Donors should modify their due diligence and compliance processes to respond to rapid onset emergencies. In particular, trust-based approaches to due diligence can be effective and appropriate.

About Shift Power for Peace

Shift Power for Peace (SP4P) is a collaborative initiative founded on the belief that the current global peacebuilding model, where power and decision making is held by people furthest away from conflict, is not working, and that the key to sustainable peace is local leadership. Working with champions in all parts of the peacebuilding ecosystem, we seek to shift power and agency to local change agents building peace in their own communities.

SP4P is founded by Conducive Space for Peace, Humanity Unity and Peace Direct.

Shift Power for Peace

shiftpowerforpeace.org