

## Research Brief: Creative and Embodied Peacebuilding

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In recent years, more attention in peacebuilding research and practice has been drawn to the [micro-foundations](#) underlying the transition from war to peace – the interpersonal dimensions of coexistence, trust, reconciliation, and truth-telling that feed back into the more normative, legal and institutional factors at the meso- and macro-levels. Existing programmes and policy interventions aimed at establishing the micro-foundations of sustainable peace, however, are mostly designed as [cognitive, dispassionate forms of engagement](#) while the emotional component behind behavioural responses among conflict-affected populations tends to be overlooked. Shame, fear, hatred, revenge and envy, among other emotions, deeply insinuate themselves into the psyches of individuals subjected to violence. They require modes of expression that convey complex, sometimes paradoxical thoughts and feelings that defy the language of leaflets, presentations and trainings or the constraints of verbal communication in general. This research brief explores how creative and embodied peacebuilding methods through arts and other mediums can help transform the emotional and spiritual micro-level foundations of post-conflict societies.

Arts and other creative activities help people [identify, express and manage emotions](#) that, when left unaddressed, can build up subtle tensions undermining the long-term stability of a community's social fabric. They enable participants to attach alternative meanings to challenging or traumatic experiences of the past and present through symbols, metaphors and corporeal expression. When engaging with various artistic and creative languages, the transformation occurs in the mindset of each person: depending on the nature of the activity, they can positively impact trust, self-control, and empathy as well as communication and conflict resolution skills in the interpersonal realm. There is a [rich tapestry](#) of creative peacebuilding methods that may be conducted individually or collaboratively such as creative writing, storytelling, poetry, dance, drama, music, visual arts and traditional customs.

Visual arts can be a way to develop sensitive connections with past traumatic events while portraying perceptions of the external world. Works of visual art created by conflict-affected populations, both FAAs and civilians, bear witness of their experiences and convey powerful emotional reactions that can inspire mutual understanding and a desire to work for peace. Peacebuilding practitioners can take advantage of methodologies that engage participants with art in particularly immersive and contemplative ways. During [intersubjective body mapping](#), for instance, FAAs and community members fill out life-sized outlines representing their bodies with colours, words and symbols to articulate difficult embodied experiences and illustrate the hopes and challenges of their shared (re)integration process. Similarly, textile-making practices such as embroidery, appliqué and doll-making, provide alternative conflict narration techniques characterised by deep reflection and intrinsic expression in contrast to immediate and specific verbal prompts, which may invoke reductionistic answers. Public exhibitions of such works can build intersubjective understanding by turning distrusted “others” into sentient beings that shared similar fears, reservations, grievances, and desires for peace.

Creative and embodied approaches are also a mediating tool to peacefully transform everyday conflicts that disrupt the social fabric in fragile contexts. [Participatory theatre](#), for instance, may depict typical conflict scenarios within communities and convey good governance practices and civic duties required to address them. The actors, who are either community members, traditional leaders or

professionals familiarised with the setting, portray relatable characters that reveal how disputes are rarely sustained by just one party. They then provide insights into the process of resolving their own conflicts while contributing to the resolution of conflicts faced by others. The audience can be involved by letting volunteers join the scenario on stage or offer advice for solving the problem presented. These performances are processes of dialogue and social learning that evoke changes in behaviours through observing and participating in relatable dramatised scenes, which removes layers of abstraction compared to conventional pedagogies and equips spectators to be agents of conflict transformation.

Beyond the creative dimension, *embodied* forms of peacebuilding and reconciliation can also be realised in team sports and game-related activities. Team sports and games create a constructive, rule-based space for interaction that facilitates intragroup bonding across sectoral or ethnic divides and teaches how to handle disagreements and competition fairly and non-violently. By establishing meaningful encounters and a “level playing field” between different societal groups, sports and games also have the potential to effectively integrate marginalised populations, ensuring a wholesale and sustainable peacebuilding process. Furthermore, engaging participants' both [physically and mentally](#), these activities help trauma recovery by alleviating the stress, fear, and anger that are preventing interpersonal relations to normalise and trust among conflict-affected populations to be rebuilt.

Some creative methods also offer a form of inclusive data collection that transcends the simplistic binary often applied to popular understandings of conflicts. Participatory filmmaking, photography and oral history projects, for instance, yield visual and written research outputs in which populations can express themselves and tell their stories in a more immediate and authentic manner. If the editors curate the material in a way that [preserves the meaning](#) attached to it and respects its subjects' ideas about content and aesthetic delivery, these outputs open up imaginative and interpretative spaces on armed conflict realities to a global academic and practitioner audience that transcend positivist understandings of research data. They give [non-linear and particularised narratives](#) a platform while promoting bottom-up peacebuilding in the process.

Creative methods simultaneously are pedagogies and [knowledge capture tools](#) whose power lies in apprehending the emotional, embodied and affective experiences of violent conflict while weaving new micro-level subjectivities and relationships into a society's (post-)conflict social fabric, expanding the scope of what can be thought, said and felt in this context. Creative expression not only draws from experiences within society but also wield the power to reshape its perceptions and values: They facilitate the envisioning of a shared humanity among conflict-affected populations and their diverse identities by stimulating communicative agency and transforming the divisive symbolisms of conflict legacies.

Moreover, by foregrounding the layered accounts and multitude of perspectives underlying [complex post-conflict settings](#) creative and embodied approaches have the potential to decolonise peacebuilding research and practice, which often comes with pre-conceived notions that flatten highly nuanced embedded experiences. However, policies and programmes need to avoid imposing contextually inadequate creative interventions and refrain from evaluating their success based on traditional criteria. Process and programme design must therefore be guided by what populations deem meaningful creative practice and how they define its success, which may be less immediately quantifiable than in conventional formats.

The following table summarises key points peacebuilding practitioners can follow to render creative and embodied methods more participatory, postcolonial, and overall beneficial to the healing and post-conflict growth of individuals and communities while improving the measurement and evaluation of their outcomes.

| Dimension   | Measures  | Expected Outcomes  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Contextually Embedded and Decolonial Intervention Design</b> | <p><b>Creative and embodied peacebuilding interventions must be contextually adequate and culturally pertinent.</b> If the methods are familiar or reflect the local sociocultural contexts they are employed in, participants are more likely to identify with and feel confident in a given form of collective and self-expression.</p> <p><b>Acknowledge that creative tools that work in one context may not be compatible with another.</b> Shared symbolisms, meanings as well as cultural and communicative practices differ between populations and subgroups within them (e.g., ethnic minorities, displaced people, victim groups). Similarly, local interpretations of outcome-related notions like justice and reconciliation may vary.</p> <p><b>Methods should build on existing creative or embodied practice in a given context</b> (e.g., traditional rituals, arts and crafts) <b>or assess the success potential of different method proposals through participatory evaluation</b> (e.g., participant observation and interviews). These can determine which forms of creative and embodied expression target populations attach meaning to in order to develop methods with transformative potential. Consulting the expertise of local cultural workers or traditional leaders, for instance, can add further robustness to the method design.</p>  | <p><b>A creative social learning and peacebuilding process with intrinsically meaningful rather than exogenously imposed methodologies.</b> These tend to be adopted more easily, are more effective and receive broader acceptance among target populations. In some contexts, the support of local community leaders and traditional conflict mediators is especially important for this acceptance.</p> <p>Designing contextually adequate and culturally pertinent creative pedagogies enables them to be assumed as long-term mechanisms of everyday conflict resolution, reconciliation or individual and collective healing, ensuring <b>sustainable benefits for target populations.</b></p>   |
| <b>Participatory Implementation</b>                             | <p><b>Directly involve local populations in the implementation of interventions</b> as, for instance, instructors/facilitators/coaches. This can be realized through capacity building workshops, which simultaneously serve as generative brainstorming sessions, in which roles and procedural details of the ensuing implementation are openly discussed. Ideally, facilitator training happens in several stages throughout the process and is continuously informed by feedback mechanisms put in place for participants.</p> <p><b>Facilitation of and participation at eye level:</b> Both internal and external facilitators should be aware of potential power imbalances between target populations and the organisers/funders but also among participants themselves. This entails mitigating the reproduction of top-down knowledge hierarchies and ensuring that all perspectives are incorporated, as creative expression may also reproduce power imbalances ingrained in factors like gender and ethnicity.</p> <p><b>Respect the processes' integrity</b> by resisting the urge to "refine" it after rendering the implementation participatory, even if it means retrofitting project plans and objectives and taking a more passive role as the organiser.</p> <p><b>Pragmatically appreciate the limits of participatory implementation:</b> Broadest participation is not always best. Working out the process with a few representative individuals consciously selected with inclusive criteria may better streamline the desired local inputs and yield better overall results, especially in interventions benefitting marginalised populations.</p>   | <p><b>A locally owned and therefore more flexible and accountable execution of methods.</b> This approach empowers people to implement creative peacebuilding solutions autonomously and adapt to concerns and changing (conflict) circumstances. Anchoring facilitation and workshop leadership skills in target populations prevents reliance on external actors to implement these pedagogies.</p> <p><b>Challenging existing hierarchies of knowledge creation while allowing for a diversity of perspectives</b> and the co-creation of narratives that nurture a sustainable, plural and inclusive culture of peace.</p> <p><b>Decolonising not only of the content/design of the pedagogy but also the underlying implementation process.</b> Often, methods are formally informed in a bottom-up manner while being materialising through pre-conceived, classically "Western" approaches.</p> <p><b>Organisers can learn from the success of participatory implementation approaches</b> for future intervention design – an additional feedback mechanism independent of the intervention's impact evaluation.</p> |
| <b>Measurement and Evaluation (M&amp;E) Adjustment</b>          | <p><b>M&amp;E must capture if populations perceived the creative expression as meaningful</b> for their personal development (e.g., trauma healing) and transformative, peace and reconciliation promoting perceptions of their social environment. This makes it problematic to categorise as (un)successful, especially since the change they invoke may be protracted and not immediately measurable.</p> <p>Creative methods deal with "affect" (emotional change based) outcomes rather than "effect" (tangible change based) ones. Capturing this form of change may involve complex, layered responses that are difficult to aggregate. This requires focusing on the relational rather than the technical, i.e., how and for whom outcomes materialize at the individual and collective levels. It also entails portraying these results as more "indicative" than "determinative" of change and concrete impacts as open ended.</p> <p><b>Creative peacebuilding interventions can also be evaluated with creative methods,</b> gathering data and feedback more informally, for example, using drawings and videos, diaries and storytelling. These are potentially symbiotic tools for measuring creative impact as they reveal the resulting thoughts, feelings and particularised perspectives that may not be apprehended by surveys, interviews or words in general. However, full reliance on these tools is difficult, as they are hard to scale and may cause interpretive ambiguity and comparability issues.</p> <p><b>Discuss M&amp;E with participants and local stakeholders at different stages of the process:</b> from evaluation design to data collection tools, analysis approach and reporting format. Stakeholder involvement can enable the organisers to better measure, understand and represent the socially and culturally contextualised emotional change that creative peacebuilding methods may prompt in their setting.</p> | <p><b>Appropriate and complexity-aware M&amp;E for creative and embodied methods</b> that doesn't focus on immediately tangible effects and doesn't aim to quantify outcomes in conventional ways. Mixed-methods qualitative measurement tools that include creative components give insights into initial signs of individual and collective affect-based change in participants that can be framed as a non-deterministic outcome.</p> <p><b>A participatory method to measure intervention impacts that is less dispassionate, rationalistic and linearly attached to predetermined metrics.</b> This harmonizes M&amp;E with the didactic essence of creative methods and renders it more conceptually and procedurally decolonial.</p> <p>By more adequately <b>identifying success and holistically integrating complex feedback,</b> this form of M&amp;E helps manage expectations for future creative peacebuilding interventions, improves their design and innovates them through bottom-up inputs.</p>   |