INNOVATIVE PEACEBUILDING IN SYRIA
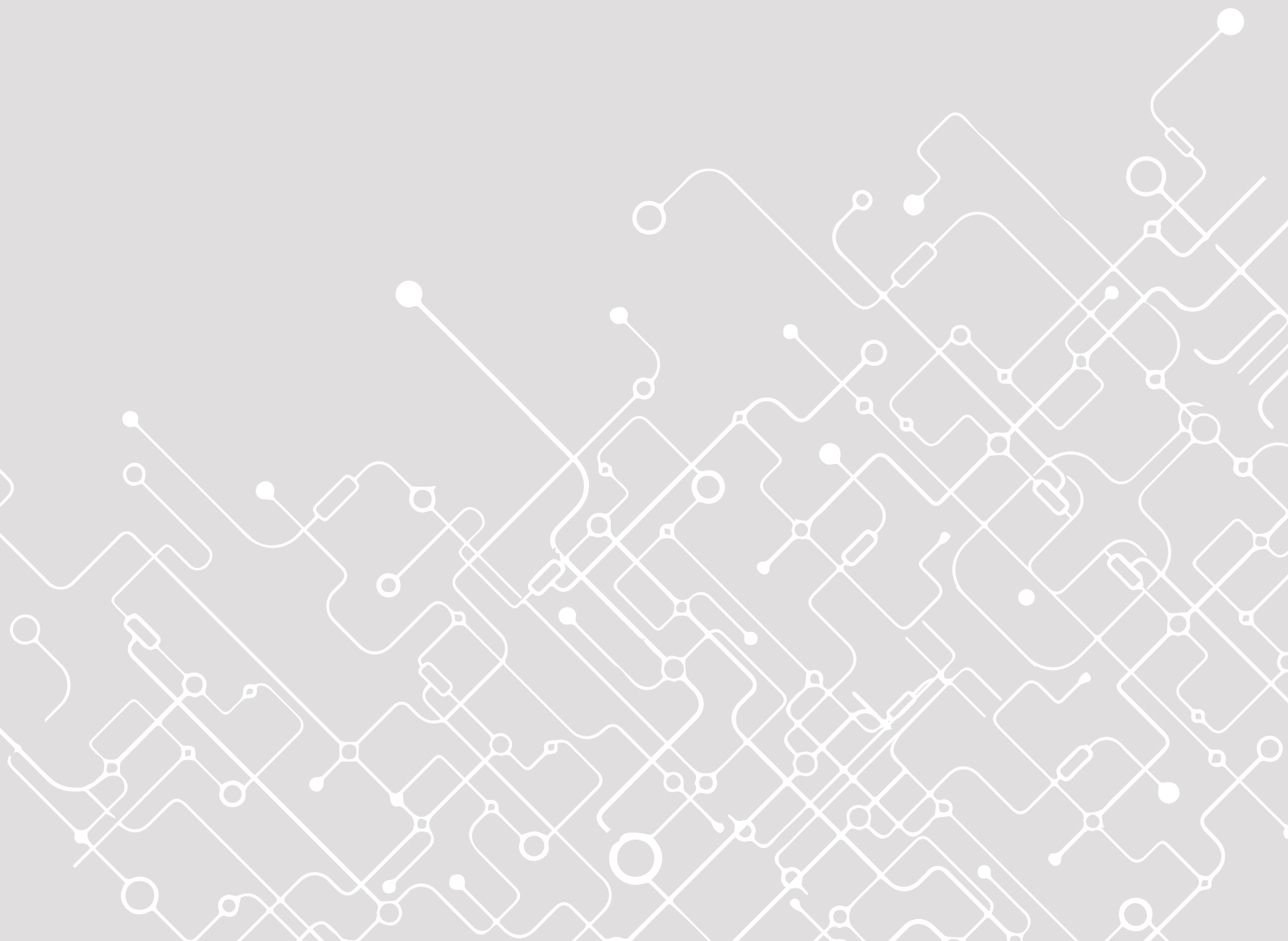
A SCOPING STUDY OF THE STRATEGIC USE OF TECHNOLOGY TO BUILD PEACE IN THE SYRIAN CONTEXT

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ABOUT BUILD UP

Build Up is a social enterprise dedicated to supporting the emergence of alternative infrastructures for civic engagement and peacebuilding. We work with civic activists and peacebuilders to find and apply innovative practices through arts, research or technology tools that help them achieve their missions.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research presented in this report reviews the global context of the peacetech sector and examines current uses of technology in peacebuilding initiatives in the Syrian context.

The report draws on desk research and 20 expert interviews carried out remotely in February and March 2016, in both Arabic and English. Desk research covered organisations funding work in Syria, researching the Syria context and working in or on Syria. Interviews focused on organisations working in / on Syria, ranging from large international NGOs to local civil society associations. The report also incorporates views shared by British Council staff through individual interviews and at a one-day workshop held on 25 February, 2016.

The term 'peacetech' emerged in mid-2015, referring to the convergence of conversations that had so far taken place under the 'technology - or information and communication technologies (ICTs) - and peacebuilding' umbrella. In this report, we define peacetech as an emerging body of peacebuilding practice which includes a technological component that is of **strategic importance** to its objective(s). We emphasise the strategic use of technology to distinguish peacebuilding actors and activities that use technology as part of their general organisational management (making use of email, website, social media presence as most civil society actors do) from those that use technology with the strategic aim to build peace (which we consider peacetech actors and activities).

From a global review of peacetech initiatives, we have identified three key functions technology can have in peacebuilding initiatives: **data** (aggregation, gathering, analysis, visualisation); **communication** (more voices, alternative narratives, sharing information); **networking and mobilisation** (alternative spaces, engagement towards collective action). This definition covers hundreds of projects of varying scale and objectives all over the world.

This diversity is however underpinned by common opportunities and challenges, ethical and operational. There is potential for greater inclusion, but who really owns the systems? And connectivity is not universal; it follows existing divisions and inequalities in terms of access and literacy. The potential for greater knowledge does not automatically result in better capacity to respond to conflicts and can sometimes be divisive. The mobilising power of technology often has limited impact outside of the digital world and can raise serious security questions in the context of peacebuilding.

Despite not using digital tools strategically, these organisations rely on online presence to disseminate information on their activities, and thus consider online presence critical to their peacebuilding aims.

For Syria, in a changing conflict context, definitions of 'peacebuilding' or 'peacebuilders' are fluid. It is important to note that few actors working in the Syrian context would self-define as 'peacebuilders' or 'peace activists', in large part a result of the co-option of the term by the Syrian Ministry of Reconciliation, which some argue does not aim for reconciliation, but rather for the capitulation of rebels.

Combining a large swisspeace survey of how non-violent actors saw peace activities and our interviews for this report, we identify four relevant types of peacebuilding activities:

1. Promoting peaceful values and countering sectarian rhetoric;
2. Human rights activism;
3. Host-refugee relations;
4. Influencing international opinion.

Of the 55 organisations working in the Syrian context that were reviewed, 15 used digital technologies exclusively to have an online presence (website or social media). Despite not using digital tools strategically, these organisations rely on online presence to disseminate information on their activities, and thus consider online presence critical to their peacebuilding aims.

Among the remaining organisations that do engage in what we would define as peacetech initiatives, the strongest focus is on use of communication technologies to create peaceful narratives and share a greater diversity of voices.

There are also a number of organisations that run capacity building initiatives to support peacebuilding actors in using communications technology. The other clear focus is on use of data technologies for crisis response; these initiatives are mostly (all but one) conflict analysis / early warning systems serving the international community.

A surprising feature of the Syria peacetech landscape is the limited use of technology for networking and mobilisation. The limited use of technology by organisations working in human rights activism is also of interest.

GAPS AND NEEDS

Based on the evaluation of the context, actors and initiatives, we identify nine gaps in peacebuilding in the Syrian context that peacetech could contribute to filling.

Short-term: in the current context

1. Peacetech can be an opportunity to do peacebuilding without calling it that.

2. There is a recognised need among Syrian peace actors to network with other local initiatives.

3. Despite the proliferation of alternative / new media outlets, there are questions about their impact on the conflict discourse.

4. Stories and opinions from inside Syria are increasingly vocal, but still fail to reach Track II processes.

5. Few human rights activists are using technology strategically.

6. Peacetech presents an opportunity to reach people and areas that can be physically hard to access.

Longer-term: projecting into the future of a stabilisation / recovery phase

1. There is currently limited capacity to sustain tech-enabled initiatives in the longer term.

2. The creative capacity of Syrian artists and digital activists who have fled to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey needs support.

3. There is an opportunity to harness cultural, educational and livelihoods initiatives so that they also build social cohesion and community resilience.

More concretely, there seem to be three areas where there is extensive local capacity that could be supported with peacetech initiatives.

1. There are many, local and smaller-scale media initiatives that could benefit from strategic communications support and from connecting with each other.

2. There are many creative / artistic initiatives that could benefit from access to technology tools and processes to broaden their reach.

3. There are many local actors who have clear capacity to maintain a strong online presence and are likely to want to learn other technology tools and processes to support their work.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, the British Council commissioned Build Up to map current peacetech initiatives responding to the Syrian crisis and consider options for future work using technology for peacebuilding and development.

Despite suspending operations in Syria in 2012, the British Council has continued to deliver programming supporting Syrians and host communities affected by the crisis. The British Council is supporting a new generation of Syrian social leaders, creating pathways to greater hope and opportunity for young Syrians, and contributing to systemic development in neighbouring countries. In this context, the British Council is keen to explore innovative and inclusive approaches to working in the Syrian context, including the emerging peacetech sector.

This report reviews the global context of the peacetech sector and examines current peacetech initiatives in the Syrian context. The report draws on desk research and 20 expert interviews carried out remotely in February and March 2016, in both Arabic and English. Desk research covered organisations funding work in Syria, researching the Syria context and working in / on Syria. Interviews focused on organisations working in / on Syria, ranging from large international NGOs to local civil society associations.

The report also incorporates views shared by British Council staff through individual interviews and at a one-day workshop held on 25 February 2016.

With these inputs, the report identifies possible ways to engage in peacetech in Syria. We hope that the insights offered by our research will be of interest to UK policymakers and to organisations and individuals who are working in the Syrian context, particularly those in the peacebuilding, cultural and educational spheres.

This research is already helping to shape the British Council's future work in the Syrian context, ensuring that what is delivered, through high-quality programmes, meets the needs of the British Council's partners and the people who participate in, and benefit from, its programmes.

PEACETECH IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Defining the peacetech sector

The term 'peacetech' emerged in mid-2015, referring to the convergence of conversations that had so far taken place under the 'technology - or information and communication technologies (ICTs) - and peacebuilding' umbrella. In this report, we define peacetech as an emerging body of peacebuilding practice which includes a technological component that is of **strategic importance** to its objective(s).

As the name indicates, it consists of 'technology' and 'peacebuilding', both of which are notoriously elusive to define. According to Johan Galtung, *'peacebuilding achieves positive peace by creating structures and institutions of peace based on justice, equity and cooperation, thus addressing the underlying causes of conflict.'* (Galtung in Paffenholz 2010: 45). While there are many more definitions of peacebuilding, the breadth of activities covered in Galtung's is suitable for this research.

ICTs and technologies are changing at a staggering pace, and therefore it makes little sense to focus on actual technological tools. With this in mind, we define 'technology' as *'the different types of hardware, software or systems that enable people to access, generate and share information. This extends traditional definitions to include technologies such as video games that provide new spaces to share information and communicate, or even unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that provide new ways to collect information remotely, moving beyond a focus on equipment to the ways people use technologies'* (Gaskell et al. 2016).

This definition of technology focuses on uses rather than tools and can be contextualised in the peacebuilding environment under consideration. From a global review of peacetech initiatives, we have identified three key functions technology can have in peacebuilding initiatives: **data** (aggregation, gathering, analysis, visualisation); **communication** (more voices, alternative narratives, sharing information); **networking and mobilisation** (alternative spaces, engagement towards collective action). These broad categorisations are integrated in this research to understand the role of technology in a peacebuilding context, by understanding the actors involved, the types of peacebuilding activities they undertake, and the different ways technology is used to **strategically** support these processes.

We emphasise the strategic use of technology to distinguish peacebuilding actors and activities that use technology as part of their general organisational management (making use of email, website, social media presence as most civil society actors do) from those that use technology with the strategic aim to build peace (which we consider peacetech actors and activities).

This distinction between non-strategic and strategic uses of technology in the peacebuilding context also helps to address a concern that 'peacetech' is just a new word (a new fad?) for something that is already being done. To illustrate this, consider the work currently carried out by the British Council in English language teaching that connects millions of teachers and students through online platforms (MOOCs, Facebook groups, etc.).

Arguably, this opportunity to connect people globally could be a use of technology to build peace. However, the intention of these platforms is to facilitate English language learning, not to connect people of different backgrounds and help them to find common ground. In fact, we know from research on other online communities that, left to their own devices, people will tend to group online with others with whom they already agree with or have common traits (homophily), which can at times result in more polarised views and debates. The online platforms used for English language learning are not being used strategically to build peace. One reason to engage with the emerging peacetech sector is to identify ways in which a more strategic use of technology could enhance the peacebuilding impact of the British Council or other organisations engaged in the cultural or educational spheres.

Trends and success stories in peacetech
The three key functions technology can have in peacebuilding initiatives may seem abstract. This section covers examples from each function, as well as sharing some trends in the types of initiatives that have been implemented over the past decade.

Data: from extractive to participatory
Among the first uses of technology in peacebuilding were initiatives that leveraged tools that engage a crowd to collect data on an emerging or ongoing conflict situation. Tools include SMS-reporting systems, digital maps and online survey tools. A successful example of this work is the Uwiano Platform for Peace in Kenya. Uwiano was first established for the constitutional referendum of 2010 through a partnership between local actors and the National Steering Committee for Peace Building and Conflict Management.

Uwiano used a toll-free SMS service that allowed people to report perceived threats to security. These messages were conveyed to a national situation room where they were analysed and verified, and then responses were initiated through partnerships between local civil society groups and the police. This gave police and other responders more localised information, including from groups who did not previously have a voice in conflict early warning. The platform has continued to use mobile phones and mapping technology to link local warning and conflict mitigation efforts of District Peace and Development Committees with the national Conflict Early Warning and Early Response System.

Another area where data technologies were leveraged early on was the collection of evidence of war crimes. These digital forensics initiatives have used both remote sensing (satellite imagery, UAVs) or people on the ground using apps designed to collect evidence. A successful example is Eyes on Darfur, an Amnesty International project that analysed high-resolution satellite imagery to provide evidence of atrocities being committed in Darfur, Sudan. As well as providing evidence that could later be used in international court proceedings, the project identified villages that might be at risk from further violence based on documented attacks by militias.

Projects using technologies to collect data on conflict from a crowd or remotely often have a common limitation: the increase in data available to peacebuilders is often not matched by an increase in resources for response, which can leave many reports unanswered and warnings not responded to. Conflict-affected communities are left feeling that peacebuilding data initiatives are purely extractive, eroding their trust in institutional response. This sentiment has been the impetus behind a second wave of peacebuilding data projects that emphasise participation from conflict-affected communities in all aspects of data collection, analysis and response.

Una Hakika (Are you sure?)

One successful example of a participatory peacebuilding data project is Una Hakika in Kenya.

Una Hakika (Are you sure? in Swahili) is a joint project between the Sentinel Project and iHub Research. It is a mobile phone-based information service which monitors and counters the spread of incendiary rumours in Kenya's violence-prone Tana Delta.

It uses an SMS service to gather reports of rumours, and then follows up reports up with a combination of community meetings and drone-enabled verification meetings to clarify rumours. Their emphasis on community ownership of and action on information about rumours sets them apart from projects that focus more on collecting data than on enabling an appropriate response.

Communications: from individual to collective storytelling

The most common use of technology to support peacebuilding communication activities is the curation and / or creation of an alternative narrative or discourse that challenges common (sometimes state-sponsored) divisive or outright violent narratives in conflict or post-conflict contexts. In post-conflict environments, initiatives that curate digital archives of diverse perspectives of a conflict can be very successful.

For example, Border Lives produced six films and accompanying materials curated on a dedicated website to explore people's lives and experience along the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the years of 'The Troubles'.
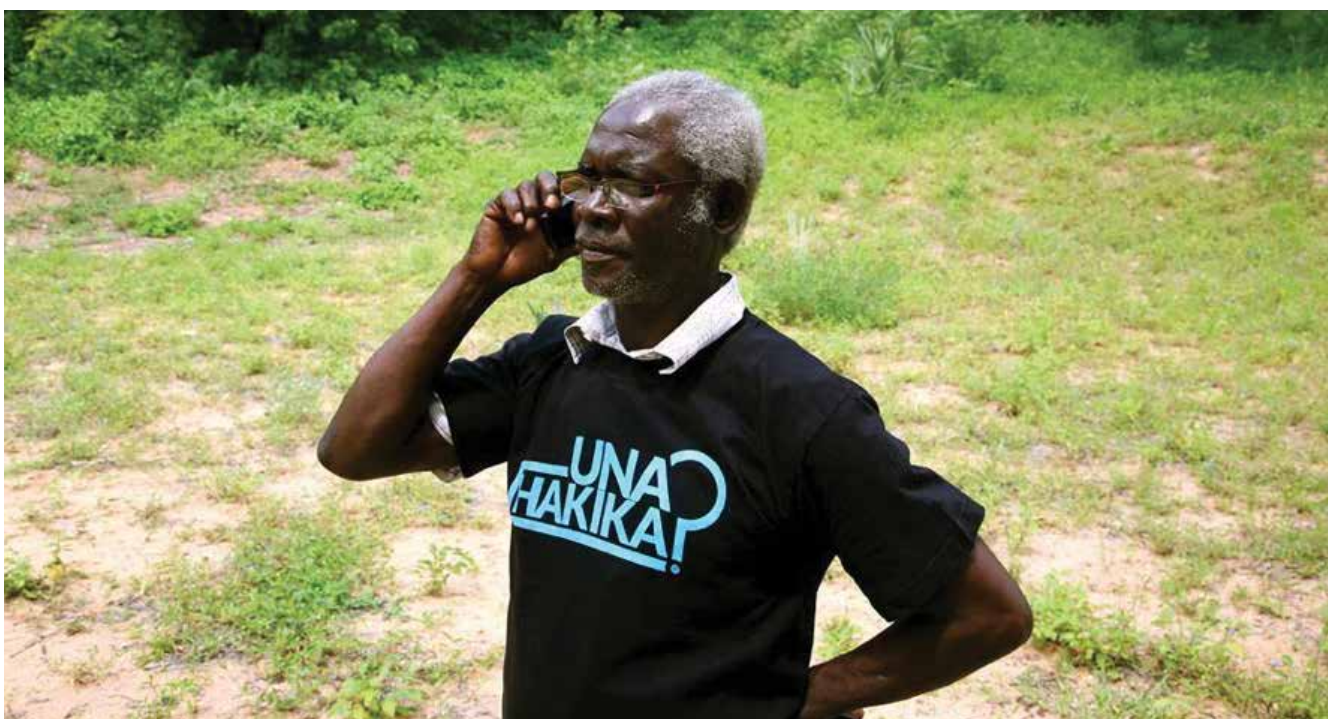
Even in contexts where conflict is still active and access to technology is more limited, communications projects that leverage technology can be effective. The emphasis in these projects is often less on memory, and more on dialogue, using the new narratives as a starting point. In the Somali Region, the Puntland Development and Research Centre runs a mobile cinema in rural communities, using film to share information about key issues related to peacebuilding, civic participation and reconciliation. Film screenings are followed by moderated discussions on the same topics, allowing these communities to take part in important societal conversations.

Although they increase the impact of peacebuilding initiatives by introducing alternative narratives and sharing information, these communications products are typically curated by an individual or a small team, and do not increase the number of voices speaking for peace.

Other peacetech initiatives have focused on citizen journalism with a peacebuilding intent, thus increasing the diversity of narratives available. A good example is Nuba Reports, an initiative that receives reports from citizen journalists on the ground in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan, where the Sudanese government and the SPLM-N group have been engaged in fighting since 2011.

Nuba Reports sheds light on the impact of the violence on civilians, and in this way hopes to bring attention to the conflict and encourage attempts to broker peace.

Citizen journalism for peace initiatives abound, but in the end are also a collection of individual narratives.

Participatory video in South Sudan
Another type of initiative also on the rise in the peacebuilding sector is participatory video, which uses digital film-making as a medium to create a collective narrative from a community. For example, a participatory video initiative funded by USAID on the border between Sudan and South Sudan resulted in two films that express the experience of peaceful coexistence of the community along the border. The films have been used by the local Joint Cross-Border Peace Committee to disseminate messages of peace along the border. In an environment where local peace conferences and committees struggled to involve women and youth, the project gave two mixed Misseriya-Dinka, Sudanses South-Sudanese groups – one young men, one women – the opportunity to make a film each about what they wanted to say about peace. These films contributed to transforming a group of peace advocates, who now have a powerful tool to develop and amplify their own voice.

Networking and mobilisation: from contact programs to collective action
Peacebuilding programs often emphasise the importance of creating networks of people that promote peace, reconciliation and coexistence. In traditional peacebuilding, contact programs that physically bring together people across a conflict divide to meet and form bonds are common. With new technologies, several organisations have been experimenting with online meeting spaces. Soliya runs a highly successful online exchange between university students in the 'West' and 'predominantly Muslim countries' that has already involved students at over 100 universities in 28 countries. Games for Peace uses the popular online game Minecraft to bring together Israeli and Palestinian teenagers in a safe space.

Other initiatives use technology as a 'hook' to encourage people from different backgrounds to meet. For example, the Middle East Education through Technology project teaches coding to teenagers from Israel and Palestine at a series of meet-ups.

The initiative has resulted in mixed teams working together to take action on social issues, moving beyond contact and dialogue.

Other initiatives leverage technology directly to turn contact into direct action. The Peace Factory uses Facebook to connect Israelis with countries traditionally identified as their enemies (Palestine, Iran, etc.). The initiative not only encourages 'friending' across conflict divides, but also asks individuals to use their Facebook presence to join 'peace marketing' campaigns.

Hands on Famagusta
Some initiatives have used online action as a springboard for offline action (and vice versa). Hands on Famagusta is an initiative to create a common vision for uniting the city of Famagusta, which is currently divided between the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the Republic of Cyprus. The initiative uses both an online game ('Imaginary Famagusta') and offline community meetings, shares the online results with offline meetings, and feeds the online game with inputs from offline discussions.

Peacetech leadership and funding
There are two processes at play in the context of peacetech leadership and funding. First, a bottom up process that is manifested in an exponential growth over the past decade of small scale, local projects using technology to help build peace. In spite of the perceived ease of use and lower barriers to entry of new technology, these local and grassroots actors often find themselves in need of external support - technical and financial. Second, there is a steady increase in top down projects where donors encourage the inclusion of new technologies for peacebuilding in grant proposals, exhibiting varying degrees of enthusiasm for innovation and specific technology tools.

While many large international governmental and non-governmental organisations have funded pilots or projects using technology for peacebuilding, few have articulated a peacetech position or strategy. The UNDP was one of the first to publish a statement highlighting the role of ICTs for peacebuilding in 2013.

Since 2007, the UNICEF Innovation Lab has been exploring uses of technology for development, and recently expanded to innovate on UNICEF's peacebuilding programming. USAID has integrated 'science, technology and innovation' as operational principles, working to implement more concrete guidelines and infrastructures since 2011. USIP created its PeaceTech Lab in 2014 to consolidate its ongoing work with technology, data and media tools. The Lab has been promoting the idea of a 'peacetech industry' with strong links with the private sector, as a way to fund innovation in peacetech. This approach has been discussed among practitioners, and many have highlighted operational and ethical issues associated with it.

By contrast, neither the EU nor DfID have a published position or policy on peacetech. However, both have funded a series of peacetech projects. For example, in 2012 DfID backed UNDP Sudan's Crisis Recovery Mapping and Analysis project, using digital, participatory mapping for peacebuilding and post-conflict governance.

Also in 2012, the EU funded Elva, a community early warning system based on SMS reporting in Georgia. In late 2015, DfID recognised the importance of the 'Principles for Digital Development' that USAID's Global Development Lab published in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders.[1]
Whilst these principles are not exclusive to peacetech, DfID is demanding partners and suppliers adhere to them.

In conclusion, there is wide-ranging and growing interest in peacetech from both local actors and donors.

At present, although traditional peacebuilding donors are keen to fund innovative projects, local actors complain funding for peacetech is scarce. As donors develop specific peacetech strategies, this mismatch may change.

Monitoring and evaluating peacetech
Very little has been done to date to capture the impacts of peacetech projects or initiatives overall. This is due notably to the infancy of the field, and to the large variety of practices contained within the peacetech umbrella, as well as the various contexts in which these initiatives are implemented. Specific project evaluations have been conducted, but lessons learned remain context-specific and no best practice for evaluating the effect of technology tools on peacebuilding impact has been developed yet. A greater emphasis has so far been placed on the potentials of ICTs in monitoring and evaluation of peacebuilding rather than a focus on evaluating peacetech activities. The idea that ICTs allow for better, faster data about project impacts has been explored by the likes of DfID, Search for Common Ground and the Geneva Peace Platform[2].

One element that has been noted in numerous practitioner discussions is the range of unintended consequences - positive or negative - that result from using technology in peacebuilding. Therefore, a good starting point in monitoring and evaluating peacetech projects is to develop a robust framework which allows for a comprehensive 'do no harm' assessment that considers not only the conflict context, but also the interaction of this context with a specific technology tool. In the short term, monitoring of outputs should include questions of access to the technology tool, security of information shared via the technology tool, and safety of participants interacting with the technology tool.

[1] See https://goo.gl/58EMfH
[2] Available at https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/CCVRI-SSP-_ICT-and-ME-_Final.pdf and http://goo.gl/WNxkZS

In the longer term, evaluation of impact should focus not only on changes to perceptions of peace, but also on the effect of the technology tool on the entire peacebuilding process. It seems that many peacetech projects fail (especially in the longer term) because implementers do not sufficiently invest in the feasibility of the technology-enabled process, which requires considering the intersection between context (technology and security), institutional capacity (long-term support for a tool) and program design (local ownership of the tool and process).

Opportunities and challenges in peacetech

New technologies have specific characteristics that are potentially beneficial for peacebuilding programs. First, with relatively low barriers to entry and dropping costs, new technologies offer the potential for greater inclusion and participation in peacebuilding. Second, as a result of this increase in reach, new technologies lead to a wider distribution of knowledge. Tools that allow for real time information result in a better and more dynamic understanding of conflict contexts. Tools that enable more people to share their stories make for a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of a context.

Finally, the democratisation of innovation that is fuelled by greater access to new technologies and wider distribution of knowledge has the potential to empower local and / or marginalised groups, creating networks of peacebuilders that emerge and adapt to changing contexts more easily than ever before. Access to technology and distribution of knowledge can potentially lead to a distribution of power, with more people contributing to and defining peace.

However, there are a large number of challenges - some operational, some ethical - that come with using technology in peacebuilding and which might limit the potential highlighted previously. Greater inclusion through technology tools depends on biases to connectivity and access, which often match issues of gender, literacy, urban / rural divides, and economic inequality. Even where connectivity and access are not problematic, some peacetech projects can be more extractive than participatory, raising questions about who really owns the intervention. New technologies can lead to a wider distribution of knowledge, but more knowledge about conflict isn't always matched by an increased capacity to respond. Furthermore, with more sources, information can become fragmented. Tech-enabled communications are also particularly prone to polarising discourses and allowing hate speech to emerge and spread.

Finally, technology tools have empowered networks of peacebuilders, but these networks don't always take significant actions. At times, their engagement is quite 'thin', what some would call 'clicktivism'. Furthermore, online or tech-enabled networks can be unstable or unsustainable, and may fail to link with existing (more robust) peacebuilding infrastructures. This can also make it difficult for peacetech initiatives to impact political processes, particularly where there is a strong resistance to change and / or political oppression.

PEACETECH IN THE SYRIAN CONTEXT

Peacebuilding context

In this report the 'Syrian context' encompasses initiatives and actors operating in the Syrian territory, engaging Syrian populations (mostly refugees) in neighbouring countries, and engaging Syrian populations (refugees and diaspora) further afield. Research for this report deliberately did not cover wider questions about conflict and peacebuilding dynamics in the Syrian context. Rather, the report draws on what others have written about the conflict and peacebuilding context, and then deepened research in peacebuilding initiatives utilising technology in the Syrian context.

In a changing conflict context, definitions of 'peacebuilding' or 'peacebuilders' can be quite fluid. It is important to note that few actors working in the Syrian context would self-define as 'peacebuilders' or 'peace activists'. This is in large part a result of the co-option of the term by the Ministry of Reconciliation, which some argue does not aim for reconciliation, but rather for the capitulation of rebels.

Activists who were part of the social revolution from 2011 are therefore especially unwilling to associate with these terms. The rejection of the term 'peacebuilding' is even stronger from artists, who do not consider their activities to be peace-promoting specifically, although they do contribute to social cohesion and connection with values that are eroded during conflict.

From a review of existing literature and interviews with actors working in the Syrian context, this report broadly defines peacebuilders as actors engaged in any social activity in a non-violent manner, and who are not directly involved in furthering violent conflict.

In their report 'Inside Syria',[3] swisspeace asked non-violent actors how they would define 'peacebuilding'. Again, many expressed discomfort at this term due to political associations, but nonetheless identified five key areas of non-violent activity:

1. Negotiations for the release of detained and abducted persons;
2. Mediation between different armed factions;
3. **Promoting peaceful values and countering sectarian rhetoric;**
4. **Human rights activism;**
5. Relief work / crisis response.

It is important to consider that many actors interviewed in the swisspeace report explain that they consider relief work an entry point for future reconciliation / co-existence activities (not a peacebuilding activity in itself). Furthermore, actors in Syria indicate that almost all international funding currently goes to relief work and crisis response, neglecting the other four important areas of peacebuilding work.

[3] Available at http://goo.gl/O8gliP

When considering peacetech in the Syrian context, this report focuses mainly on points three and four. We do not review relief work (except for a commentary on the intersection of technology and relief work), but we do cover initiatives working on crisis response (which we understand as conflict analysis and early warning / response). People we interviewed spoke of two additional categories of peacebuilding activity (which are perhaps more relevant outside Syria): **host-refugee relations** and **influencing international opinion**. In the evaluation of peacetech below, we add these two categories to our understanding of peacebuilding in the Syrian context.

Technology landscape

The technology infrastructure inside Syria prior to the conflict was fairly strong, with electricity, phone network and internet covering all urban areas and many rural areas. As the conflict has progressed, damage to all physical infrastructures in Syria has been extensive, although it varies by location. Interviewees note that electricity, internet and phone outages are common across Syria.

The most up to date assessment was produced by REACH[4] in September 2015, with information provided by 250 key informants covering 13 governorates and 96 sub-districts in Syria. Internet was reported to be used daily by 52 per cent of respondents and three times per week by 28 per cent. This is the case even when electricity was not available (some homes have batteries, most internet cafés have generators). Internet usage is slightly lower for women (only 47 per cent use it daily) and highest for the 15 - 34 age group. The most common internet providers are Syria Tell, MTN and satellite internet.

The technology infrastructure in Syria's neighbouring countries varies. Electricity, internet and phone outages in neighbouring Lebanon are also common. Lebanon further has an over-regulated telecomms sector, with consequently high prices for phone and internet services. Jordan and Turkey have better infrastructures and technology access overall, though the border areas and camps where Syrian refugees are located tend to be under-served.

Syrians (both inside and outside Syria) generally have strong **digital literacy**, most likely a legacy of decades of relatively strong infrastructure and education. Reports from humanitarian and peacebuilding actors confirm that the use of smartphones is very widespread among Syrians inside and outside Syria.

Where network coverage is available, many Syrians make use of mobile data to **access the internet**. In Syria and Lebanon particularly, interviewees reported that the use of mobile data is very selective -although it is very expensive, it is also highly valued. Interviewees working with Syrian refugees further report that there are insufficient free wifi spots to meet the demand for internet use, but where they are available they are a huge draw for refugees.

The 'Inside Syria' report explains that **social media** is widely considered as critical to activism and informal organising. REACH's report on communication channels further explains that most people trust information shared on social media platforms on the current events inside Syria. Facebook and Whatsapp are the most used social media tools in Syria. The 2015 'Arab Social Media' report states there are nearly four million Facebook users in Syria, or approximately 17 per cent of the population (this does not count Syrians outside of Syria)[5].

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[4] Available at http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_syr_social_media_
thematic_report_september2015_final.pdf
[5] Due to US sanctions, Facebook does not provide age or gender disaggregated data of Facebook users in Syria.

The report also shows that 83 per cent of Syrian Facebook users access the platform every day, and 95 per cent of them do so from a smartphone. However, the REACH report has considerably higher figures for social media use, stating that up to 90 per cent of Syrians aged 15 - 34 and 71 per cent of Syrians aged over 34 use social media platforms (with Facebook and Whatsapp leading). Whatsapp is reportedly used by up to 80 per cent of Syrians to stay in touch with family and friends (including those who have fled Syria).

Actors and initiatives

This report does not provide an exhaustive review of all peacebuilding projects and activities in the Syrian context, but it does provide a sufficiently broad review to cover most projects and activities using technology tools strategically. The research team contacted 60 actors known to be active in peacetech. The team also reviewed entries to a peacetech database, as well as participation in peacetech networks. Through these consultations, the team identified 55 organisations that were reportedly using technology for peacebuilding activities in the Syrian context. The team interviewed 20 of them, and exchanged emails and / or reviewed publicly available materials for the 35 remaining. Findings in this and following sections are based on this review.

Who and what overview

Of the 55 organisations working in the Syrian context that were reviewed, 24 work inside Syria and 17 work in countries that neighbour Syria. 20 work only with Syrians inside Syria, nine work only with Syrians outside Syria, and eight work with both. 18 organisations are mostly focused on the international community. About half of the organisations reviewed had more than one peacebuilding project.

The breakdown of organisations by function of technology is indicated in the pie chart below.

Organisations that are marked as using technology for 'online presence' refer to those that have a website and social media presence that they consider particularly important. According to our earlier definition, we would not consider these organisations to be engaging in peacetech, since they do not use technology strategically to build peace. In fact, we understand that almost all peacebuilding actors in the Syrian context (including those not covered by this report) are likely to have some kind of presence online. That said, we kept the 15 organisations categorised here as 'online presence' within our review of peacetech because it appears that having an online presence was of special importance to these organisations: interviewees reported that having their activities recognised online was critical to disseminating information among likely allies.

These organisations may also be more open to further engaging in a strategic use of technology to build peace, given that they recognise its potential.

Breakdown of organisations by function of technology

Communications — Data — Networking and mobilisation — Online presence
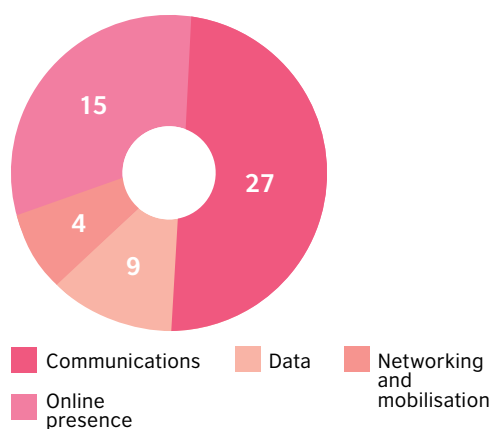
The breakdown of organisations by peacebuilding activity type is indicated in the pie chart below.
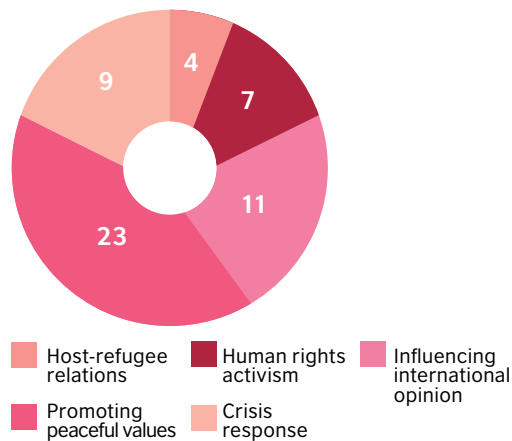
Note that this is not necessarily reflective of the breakdown of all peacebuilding activities in the Syrian context, but rather of those that use technology strategically (peacetech initiatives) or rely heavily on having an online presence (as explained above).

It is not surprising that 'promoting peaceful values' contains the most number of organisations, since it covers the widest range of activities relevant to the Syrian context, including: sharing diverse perspectives, countering sectarian rhetoric (and recruitment), and reflecting on cultural heritage.

Interviewees reported that they view the mainstream media seen as a source of conflict, highlighting the importance of promoting different (peaceful) narratives and messages.

We noted above that Syrian actors report 'relief work / crisis response' was the most prevalent activity in the Syrian context. Our analysis does not reflect this because we have not chosen to review organisations undertaking relief work (although in the next section we reflect on work done at the intersection of technology and relief work). Organisations marked as working in 'crisis response' all carried out activities that are explicitly about conflict analysis, early warning or early response.

Breakdown of organisations by peacebuilding activity type

Legend:
- Host-refugee relations
- Human rights activism
- Influencing international opinion
- Promoting peaceful values
- Crisis response

The table below cross-references functions of technology and peacebuilding activity types:

	Communications	Data	Networking & mobilisation	Online presence
Host-refugee relations	1	1	1	1
Human rights activism	2	1	0	4
Influencing international opinion	7	0	0	4
Promoting peaceful values	16	0	2	5
Relief work / crisis response	1	6	0	0

Evaluation of existing initiatives

As mentioned above, 15 of the organisations reviewed used digital technologies exclusively to have an online presence (website or social media). Despite not using digital tools strategically, these organisations rely on online presence to disseminate information on their activities, and thus consider online presence critical to their peacebuilding aims. This is the case, for example, of the Syrian Women's Forum for Peace, the Ana Heeya initiative and Rethink Rebuild Society, to name a few. In fact, several interviewees recognised the potential for using data, communication and networking technologies more strategically. Responses at interview further suggest that many other Syrian peacebuilding organisations might share this view.

Among the remaining organisations that do engage in what we would define as peacetech initiatives, **the strongest focus is on use of communication technologies to create peaceful narratives and share a greater diversity of voices**. Most organisations working with communications technologies either aim to promote peaceful values among Syrians (inside or outside Syria, typically in Arabic) or are actively trying to influence international opinion (typically in English). There are few initiatives that strive for both aims. Initiatives range from locally produced media that have embraced new technologies for production and dissemination (e.g. Bidayyat, Mojez Brief), to citizen journalism (e.g. Syria Today), to community / participatory media (e.g. Peace Lens, Turning Tables). Most initiatives working inside Syria combine digital and traditional publications; many initiatives striving to influence international opinion are going digital only. One interviewee explains: "Any new media organisation working to change people's views about Syrian refugees knows that if you want to spread a message exponentially, the only way to do it is a website. Internet is everywhere in Europe, smartphone penetration among refugees is very high."

A subset of these organisations use technologies to collect documents and information in order to preserve Syrian heritage. The Day After for example combines a primary aim of safeguarding official documents, perception surveys and the dissemination of this information to policymakers. Creative Moment of the Syrian Revolution's aim is to "collect and document each creative expression created by Syrian people since the beginning of the Syrian revolution".

There are also a number of organisations that run capacity building initiatives to support peacebuilding actors in using communications technology: the Asfari Foundation supports citizen journalism initiatives, Shar for Development trains Syrians and Kurds in media, news and technology, the SecDev foundation supports both digital security (SalamaTech) and online communications strategies (BeHeard), and Creative Associates builds capacity for organisations and entrepreneurs who want to start new radio stations. Deirdre Collings at the SecDev foundation explains that the effectiveness of ISIS on social media was a wake up call for non-violent activists, which explains growing demand for their trainings.

The other clear focus is on use of data technologies for crisis response. These initiatives are mostly (all but one) conflict analysis / early warning systems serving the international community. The Carter Center's Syria Conflict Mapping Project has worked since 2012 to analyse open source and social media information related to the Syrian conflict, using a variety of data scraping and visualisation tools, with the stated goal of assisting mediators and humanitarian responders. First Mile GEO, a US-based company, recently started offering a paid service (Syria's Human Geography) that provides data on key infrastructure in Syria, as well as access to an on-demand network of enumerators with capacity to rapidly collect data. Several other crisis response data projects remain too sensitive to be shared.

A surprising feature of the Syria peacetech landscape is the limited use of technology for networking and mobilisation. This may in part be a problem of definition: online organising is certainly very common among activists and advocates that associate themselves with the revolution. In fact, people working in or with the Local Coordination Committees report that social media played and continues to play a critical, instrumental role in enabling the kind of networked organising most of their political and social work activities require. The issue of trust might play a vital role in this regard. A Syrian interviewee asserted that cooperation on the ground was an issue because "we are working under hidden names – how can you cooperate with another person if you don't know them in person?" Nonetheless, it is interesting that actors working to promote peaceful values are not making use of technology in this way.

The two organisations that are using technology for networking and mobilisation both target young people and use education as an entry point. The Karam Foundation runs a leadership program that seeks to empower Syrian refugee youth to create peaceful communities through entrepreneurial and technology workshops. Natakallam connects Syrian refugees in Lebanon with Arabic learners elsewhere. Initially set up as an education and livelihoods project, most learners report joining the service as much to understand Syrians as to learn Arabic, and most Syrian refugees join as much to earn an income as to get a chance to present Westerners with a different perspective of Syrians.

The limited use of technology by organisations working in human rights activism is also of interest. In other conflict and post-conflict contexts, human rights activists are often key users of technologies for data (collection, analysis and visualisation), communications (to create alternative narratives about abuses) and networking / mobilisation (for advocacy in human rights).

In the Syrian context, the human rights organisations we have reviewed have an online presence (and consider this important), but only one (the Syria Institute's Siege Watch) uses data technologies, and only two (the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria and Maf Syrian Organisation for Human Rights) use communications technologies. In fact, one interviewee stated: "We are filling a niche for data gathering and analysis on critical issues which for whatever reason bigger internationals/think tanks are not taking on; it's frustrating, the UN and US government have big data gaps."

Finally, although research for this review deliberately did not review organisations using technology for relief work or humanitarian assistance, we did speak with a number of individuals working in the humanitarian space[6].

Over the past six months, there has been a rapid growth in initiatives that built apps or other technology solutions for Syrian refugees. A large number of these initiatives remain at the prototype stage, lacking both content and embedding in humanitarian processes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these initiatives are "solutions looking for problems", developed away from their intended users, and are therefore unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term. In the words of one interviewee: "New applications and websites are being released every day to support Syrian refugees. It's very confusing. There is no-one looking at whether this application is actually delivering for refugees." Other interviewees expressed frustration at how "trendy" tech for refugees initiatives have become, and commented that too much journalistic coverage can leave Syrians feeling instrumentalised for the benefit of people working in technology for good.

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[6] Build Up is collaborating with Internews on NewsThatMoves, an information service for refugees traveling the Balkans Route. As a result of this, the Build Up team has been in touch with several tech-refugees groups and initiatives.

Gaps and needs

Based on the evaluation of the context, actors and initiatives above, we identify nine gaps in peacebuilding in the Syrian context that peacetech could contribute to filling.

Short-term: in the current context

1. **Peacetech can be an opportunity to do peacebuilding without calling it that.** Many actors in the Syrian context speak of the politicisation of peacebuilding initiatives. There is also a fear that any use of technology to promote certain messages can be seen as a threat. However, spaces that offer training in and / or access to technology tools do not elicit the same response. In the words of Andras Beszterczey (Mercy Corps): "If we had more funding, I would like to explore how we can utilise technology to facilitate the types of positive social interactions we know do build social cohesion between groups. In Colombia, for example, municipalities establish free internet points to improve e-commerce and access to services, and I see opportunities to use that space for peacebuilding". This idea of technology as a convener, "a place to hang out", has been used in other contexts with different successful models to structure the space: from free internet access points to maker labs to coding schools to self-organised learning spaces. Initiatives that use technology as a hook to bring people together in a physical space may be particularly relevant to work on social cohesion between refugees and host communities.

2. **There is a recognised need among Syrian peace actors to network with other local initiatives.** When asked about uses of technology they would like to further explore, several interviewees noted the operational difficulties in sharing information and wondered about the potential for digital networks of peace actors across Syria that facilitate information sharing and coordination of actions. Deirdre Collings at the SecDev Foundation explains: "One of the biggest disadvantages to the Syrians who still believe in peace and a better future is being able to cut through the noise to make their voices heard; to join hands across their isolation and understand there are like minded others from other constituencies with whom they can work strategically; to bridge the silence and the barriers that the conflict has put up between people who believe in peace." Some Syrian organisations provided evidence of networking on the ground, such as Deepening Awareness and Restoring Bridges and The Day After, albeit not through technology. Further consultations with local actors seem necessary to better understand this undeniable potential for peacetech.

3. **Despite the proliferation of alternative / new media outlets, there are questions about their impact on the conflict discourse.** Actors working with media to promote peaceful values report that they view the mainstream media as a source of conflict. Yet many alternative and local media outlets have limited reach, are not connected with each other and do not connect with traditional media. The SecDev foundation is the only organisation providing this kind of strategic communications support. Speaking of the success of one of their media campaigns, a global advocacy group explains: "Professionalism in visual communication can transform how Syrians perceive things." More peacetech initiatives focused on networking, production and dissemination of alternative media could help increase their impact on the promotion of peaceful values.

4. **Stories and opinions from inside Syria are increasingly vocal, but still fail to reach Track II processes.** Since early 2015, Search for Common Ground and the European Institute of Peace have run a platform for international Track II organisations working on Syria. Yet in a recent report shared by KOFF[7], Syrian civil society organisations state they still do not feel Track I or II processes are receiving the diversity of Syrian voices that want to be heard. There is an opportunity for peacetech initiatives to fill this gap. One interviewee stated: "You've got all these NGOs, do-gooders, they're not listening to their counterparts; we should bring together the biggest grouping of Syrian CSOs and changemakers, and see what their demands are and what they want international partners to push for." One global advocacy group tried to get a sense of what CSOs thought was needed for peace negotiations, surveying 288 organisations for their views on ceasefires, no fly zones, etc. However, this information is not reaching policymakers.

5. **Few human rights activists are using technology strategically.** There is an opportunity to build on experience in other conflict and post-conflict contexts, where human rights activists use various technology tools for data (collection, analysis and visualisation), communications (to create alternative narratives about abuses) and networking / mobilisation (for advocacy in human rights).

6. **Peacetech presents an opportunity to reach people and areas that can be physically hard to access.** Abdulhamid Qabbani, British Council consultant in Turkey, put it well: "There is big space for #peacetech to operate in those areas [inside Syria, refugee camps around Syria]. When we talk about identity, it's not just a physical conversation but also connection between communities inside of Syria and tech could play a big role in that. When we talk about working with camps, refugees there (e.g. Turkey) have access to internet but we can't get access to camps. So if want to serve people in camps, we need technology." Others concur on the importance of leveraging technology to reach people that otherwise are not being reached by peacebuilding programs, particularly younger men (14 - 17) who are at risk of joining fighting.

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[7] Available at http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/NL_144_en.pdf

Longer-term: projecting into the future of a stabilisation / recovery phase

1. **There is currently limited capacity to sustain tech-enabled initiatives in the longer term.** This is particularly true for technology solutions to the refugee crisis, often developed without the involvement of Syrians. If peacetech initiatives are to continue into a stabilisation / recovery phase, they have to invest in developing technological capacity and infrastructure. Based on the Principles of Digital Development, a best practice to achieve sustainability would be to create spaces where Syrians can develop their own peacetech solutions.

2. **The creative capacity of Syrian artists and digital activists who have fled to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey needs support.** Many actors interviewed for this report described this enormous creative capacity and energy, which is currently largely untapped as a potential source of initiatives that contribute to peace. There are, for example, a growing number of locally produced films and other arts / media products whose creators do not have the resources or capacities to disseminate them to scale. Turning Tables founder Martin Jakobsen described how music and film production are considered "safe spaces" by the Syrian refugees they have worked with in Lebanon and Jordan. Artists interviewed for this report described how their work with Syrians also has an archiving perspective "because now the situation on the level of culture is quite desperate - we're in a condition where within one generation we could lose them [traditional music and storytelling] and have no immediate reference to what abilities and talents were."

3. **There is an opportunity to harness cultural, educational and livelihoods initiatives so that they also build social cohesion and community resilience**, both inside Syria and in host – Syrian refugee communities in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Several interviewees identified both education and livelihood opportunities as the greatest need in the Syrian context right now. Several artists described how cultural activities contribute to boosting self-esteem in a situation where Syrians have few opportunities for such feedback since the context is pretty aggressive towards them. Peacetech initiatives are uniquely placed to combine culture, education, livelihoods and peacebuilding aims, using technology as a hook for engagement. Furthermore, tech and arts skills gained by participants through a peacetech project can later be monetised. Abdulhamid Qabbani, British Council consultant in Turkey, explains the importance of linking peacebuilding to wider resilience work: "It's not just about safe spaces and talking to refugees, it's about providing more psychosocial support but also skills to have a future and sense of ability, hope, so they can rise up above the despair of lack of opportunities."

In peacetech, where local design is critical to sustainability, it will be important to consider the strength of local actors, and strive to work with them directly. While one interviewee notes that working with international organisations could be useful as "they can be our bridge to policymakers", several interviewees expressed disappointment that international donors often prefer international implementing partners who "speak their language". There seem to be **three areas** where there is extensive capacity that could be supported with peacetech initiatives.

1. There are many, local and smaller-scale media initiatives that could benefit from strategic communications support and from connecting with each other.

2. There are many creative / artistic initiatives that could benefit from access to technology tools and processes. One interviewee explains why documentary films, in particular, have become a critical part of Syrian non-violent activism: "The image, in its creation, reception and interpretation, was at the heart of the Syrian revolution: creating events as it recorded them, consigning them to oblivion if it couldn't. Between these two extremes the documentary film reclaimed its importance as a means of restoring to life the untold stories of those people who live the revolution just as much as they create it." Biddayat runs a strong program of training and support in Lebanon for young Syrians who want to make documentary films, and could be a good partner in this area (although their films are not for festival audiences, not digital distribution, so would require support on strategic communications for the films).

3. There are many local actors who have clear capacity to maintain a strong online presence and are likely to want to learn other technology tools and processes to support their work.

Syria-specific considerations for peacetech design

The 'peacetech in the global context' section of this report outlines general principles for designing peacetech initiatives. This section draws from lessons and practices shared by interviewees to suggest considerations when moving forward to designing peacetech initiatives in the Syrian context.

First, Syria is at the axis of global geopolitical power, and therefore any initiative must be careful to understand who defines what 'peace' and 'tech' are. When choosing technology tools, organisations should encourage conversations on the ethical and operational challenges of using corporate technology or networked (mesh) technologies developed locally. When rolling out content of any kind, they should encourage partners to be transparent about their position and background. Being perceived as taking one side (through a choice of tech or content) could erode any trust gained among Syrians.

Second, the bias towards working with educated, English speaking people (in the Syrian context and beyond) could be reinforced by peacetech initiatives, and thus should be a design question for any implementing partner. Partners should keep in mind social norms around using technology in the Syrian context, and consider skilling up marginalised groups to ensure their participation.

Third, there are important differences in the experience of and response to the conflict between Syrians who are inside Syria, Syrian refugees that recently left Syria and the larger Syrian diaspora who have been outside Syria for decades. Andras Beszterczey (Mercy Corps) explains: "Diasporas are shown to often be more radical in their ideologies and less practical in working across lines of conflict to address shared concerns. I would be hesitant about peacebuilding initiatives focused on refugees or diaspora communities, especially in a place as fragmented as Syria". The potential tension between these different groups should be taken into account, especially in communications projects where portraying a diversity of opinions becomes especially important.

Fourth, some of the actors that engage in activities that we define here as peacetech would likely reject that label. This is particularly true of artists working to create alternative narratives. One artist said: "I believe in producing a counter-image - I don't think it will change the world, or face mass media, but it is more in harmony with ourselves. It's more about trying to give a different kind of visibility, about what can happen in cinema.

We might not be changing a lot, but it is more authentic. It's about art and not about communication strategy." It is very important that any design process respects this position, whilst still finding ways to collaborate with and support actors who do not identify as peacebuilders.

One interviewee (from an international organisation) explained this balance well: "We should support artists, designers, filmmakers who are creating things that can get high distribution online - they are important because they come from parts of society that are naturally peacebuilding. It's not about having explicit agenda - if we want a more cohesive society, we need to be supporting the people who culturally support those messages."