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**T7 Task Force Social Cohesion, Economic Transformation and Open Societies**

## **POLICY BRIEF**

# SOWING SEEDS FOR PEACE: MICRO-LEVEL PEACEBUILDING METHODS TOWARDS A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE URBAN TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

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# Abstract

The transformative power of cities is key to delivering a just and sustainable future, but this can't be executed without recognizing that cities are shared spaces with people from a variety of cultures. Reaching the many veins of society can only be achieved by a new peacebuilding<sup>1</sup> process. The idea is to focus on building relationships that collectively form new patterns, processes and structures which can play a constructive role. This includes new open spaces<sup>2</sup> and ideas not only about physical open spaces and biodiversity protection initiatives, but changes in gender-equality, decision-making processes to include marginalized groups, trust-building and social justice. There are four main challenges: 1) The difficulty of incorporating marginalized groups<sup>3</sup> into knowledge production processes; 2) Internal conflicts due to gender inequality; 3) Decision makers are often more interested in macro-level issues; and 4) There is little interest in analyzing and resolving the root causes of social injustices for sustainable policy recommendations. To transform such conflicts in the field through nature-based implementations, peacebuilding methods can be utilized, in micro- (individual) and local-level solutions, for a just and sustainable urban transformation<sup>4</sup> process.

This brief proposes solutions by sharing positive results from field research on how to take steps towards making our societies and economies more resilient and cohesive, and serve the public interest, particularly that of marginalized groups. The first step should be evaluating and implementing a peacebuilding process to create new spaces for urban development and shaping social innovation. This involves debates regarding the architecture, design, digital arts and urbanism – that generate positive impacts – to find solutions. The peacebuilding process allows for opening Peace Gardens or spaces to break down silos for a free-flow knowledge process in nature and where utopia becomes reality. It is a basic human right for everyone to share access to nature-rich local spaces, clean water, and healthy food to achieve justice. Lastly, this brief proposes the benefit of using all variety of channels as constructive transformation tools which have been implemented in the field to promote Positive Peace<sup>5</sup> with each other: neighbours and nature in an urban environment for future generations.

# Challenge

The transformative power of cities is key to delivering a just and sustainable future, but this can't be executed without recognizing that cities are shared spaces with people from a variety of cultures. Reaching the many veins of society, can only be achieved by a new peacebuilding process. The idea is to focus on building relationships that collectively form new patterns, processes and structures which can play a constructive role. This includes new thoughts and ideas not only about physical open spaces and biodiversity protection, but changes in gender-equality, decision-making processes including marginalized groups, trust-building and social justice. But there are four main challenges which need to be addressed first:

1) The difficulty of incorporating marginalized groups into knowledge production processes. Many generations will feel the impact of such deficiency in the long term, as urban transformation cannot take place where only a certain group decides and other more vulnerable, groups are excluded from the process. For example, a group that feels excluded has a higher tendency to resort to violence. (Smart Richman, 2009)

2) Internal conflicts due to gender inequality. Thinking innovatively at the intersection of gender equality is priceless for social innovation,<sup>6</sup> because many control mechanisms such as clothing, social interaction, freedom of movement, education, work and marriage prevent women from proving their existence. The birth of potential ideas at the micro- (individual) and local level of peacebuilding is thus prevented. Gender equality forms the basis of an equal society and is a key value of the G7's open, inclusive and democratic societies. This can only be made possible if the male-dominated decision-making structures are made to open new spaces for women – especially for the representatives of marginalized groups.

3) Decision makers are often more interested in macro-level issues. Small-scale and locally-designed solutions often get lost in the noise. Partnerships and urban alliances with large groups of stakeholders are mostly needed at city scales to foster the implementation of a specific policy if strategically needed; nonetheless, on the smaller urban scale, the main empowerment dimension goes to citizens and on the modality and tools by which they are actively embedded in the engagement cycle. (Mahmoud et al., 2021)

4) In general, there is little interest in analyzing and resolving the root causes of social injustices for sustainable policy recommendations. According to Ecocity World Summit held between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, data indicates that the people living in the greener areas of the cities live eight years longer than the people living in the less green of urban spaces. Those in inner urban areas are mostly representatives of vulnerable and marginalised groups. Furthermore, sustainability projects are also carried out politically, financially, etc. by the educated, white and upper middle-class local groups, which are concentrated mostly on high-tech energy transitions or utopian ideas.<sup>7</sup> However, in fact, it will be the marginalised groups who are most affected by the ecological transformation in their homes and workplaces.

How can a “newly proposed” form of governance contribute to the transformation process to reduce conflicts and find solutions together?

# Proposals

This policy brief proposes transformative governance as a framework and methodology for the implementation of peacebuilding methods. Transformative governance is a new approach to building resilient individuals, neighborhoods and communities for a peaceful future and climate change adaptation, which can be realised on the ground without furthering conflicts. The peacebuilding process for policymakers in an urban context provides a way to offer solutions with more than one variable at a time for transformative governance to change. For instance, it helps to engage with marginalized people and to transform governance systems, which can affect tensions between participants in the informed decision-making process.

Without accounting for or criticizing existing knowledge power structures,<sup>8</sup> (Richmond, 2020) we cannot find sustainable solutions for future generations. If there is no equal access to useful knowledge and know-how about sustainable interventions and if benefits are not shared equally among social groups, sectors or disciplines, any measure taken will be constrained in terms of its potential for both sustainability and justice.

In this process, the harmful power relations characterised by inequality such as domination, discrimination, exploitation, marginalization and segregation should be acknowledged, questioned and prevented. Although the scale of inequality is not comparable between that in Western countries and global Southern countries, there were many people lining up for food assistance during the first and second wave of the pandemic even in a rich city like Geneva (Chimienti, 2021). In this regard, creating Positive Peace during the transformative governance process in cities can help us secure our future.

To find solutions for the root-cause of problems in cities, we need help from multiple scientific disciplines (interdisciplinarity) and involve non-academic actors (transdisciplinary) to frame and address these problems. This may be a chance to co-work and co-create to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies, free from fear and violence, which follows the United Nations (UN) 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Goal No. 11 and climate-action target 13.1 and building peace. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development. Peace science needs to transform itself accordingly. (Dietrich, 2021) Anything is useful if it brings people together on the basis of common interests and ideas for co-creation. (Mestrum, 2016) In this creation process, peace within and between persons, within society, between societies, all the way to the mega level - within the world (Galtung, 2020) - is important. But we need to start with micro and local changes. For example, we need to build micro peace among neighbours, and within neighbourhoods and cities. This means a call for a contemporary transformative approach like Open Spaces for peace.

A concrete example of this approach is a nature-based peace project that started on the ground in February 2020. This so-called Avantgardenist<sup>9</sup> project is a prime example of a diverse community taking hands-on responsibility in their urban context. It brings together thinkers and volunteers who want to be part of a collective search for paradigms and pathways towards a world that is sustainable, equitable and just. The community Peace Garden invites different cultures and actors to establish a peaceful relationship with each other and, at the same time, resume the “dialogue” with nature. The vision of this scientific project is to

create a nature-based conflict transformation model while simultaneously facilitating intercultural knowledge exchange processes. This Urban Gardening Peace Project<sup>10</sup> at the Alevi Culture Centre Wuppertal has been implemented as a symbol for the virtue of justice and sustainable transformation.

In this process, peacebuilding helps to prevent violence, as it works with inclusiveness to help enable emergence of a common understanding in three main ways: Firstly, it supports inclusive processes of just transition that respects diversity of cultural backgrounds and ethnicity. Secondly, it promotes more “environmentally friendly” and sustainable behaviours and attitudes among participants. Thirdly, it conveys new meanings of collective struggle for a common future in different languages, cultures and sacred places. Here, we can observe how peacebuilding efforts contribute positively to social innovation and ecological transformation, and indicate that the behaviours and actions of the participants can change in a positive way. Beyond planting herb beds and growing vegetables in the middle of the city, the Peace Garden aimed to improve a common understanding of mutual respect in relationships, taking responsibility for future generations and a good life, while applying a micro-level peacebuilding methodology.

Creating peace gardens is a metaphorical symbol of just transition, emphasising the establishment of innovative order and structure without discrimination, exclusion and marginalization. Still, it is not too late to set up safer spaces as an efficient way to facilitate access to knowledge for marginalized and vulnerable groups, like migrants, women, persons with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ community.

According to urbanA<sup>11</sup> project’s co-working process results, limited citizen participation, involvement and engagement in decision-making around planning, designing, implementation and/or evaluation of scientific sustainability-oriented interventions, are a call for an agency change in order to give the citizens the freedom to act through self-determination. By increasing the opportunity for serious consideration of citizens’ needs and desires, as well as providing the chance to take an active part in shaping initiatives, the status quo of the power mechanism’s sustainability and injustice can be called into question (Wittmayer, 2019). This can only be accomplished through dialogue among diverse groups. As a peacebuilding method, nature can be used as a new element for this path.

Additionally, after the UN’s 2020 Economic and Social Council session, there was a statement about transformative change which aims at reducing barriers to participation for specific groups (like marginalized segments and the worker class) towards achieving the sustainable development goals and building transparent, accountable and inclusive institutions. Unfortunately, real-world practices progress lethargically. For instance, it is important to share resources and knowledge, and invite communities to find solutions for themselves – by themselves – about sustainable consumption behaviours and attitudes for human-wellbeing. “But we are not there yet” (Eke Schneider, 2020). This lack of governance problem weakens the marginalized groups’ culturally sensitive solutions. This is the reason why these broken bridges for a dialogue need an Open Space to be rehabilitated with the efforts of bridge builders, healers and constructive initiatives, in line with an invitation to find solutions for a common future. But urban development shouldn’t be decided by well-educated thinkers, experts, scientists or homogenic ecological activists alone; it needs diverse actors’ participation by inviting grassroots to peace tables for mapping out local actors’ participation at eye level and beginning a conflict analysis process. “Trust building” with

marginalized communities can be carried out in a healthy and sustainable way only by people who can use nonviolent language, empathize and be respectful. This needs to happen before taking steps, such as designing cities, infrastructures and data-collection questionnaires, while tackling the deeply rooted causes of unsustainable development.

# Implementations

According to Germany's 2022 policy priorities, the G7 has a special responsibility to implement the SDGs ambitiously, locally, nationally and globally. This policy recommends transformative solutions in an urban context for a common future which follows The Group of Seven's <sup>12</sup> (G7) new models of cooperation for overcoming global challenges objectives which are a sustainable planet, economic stability and transformation, healthy lives, investment in a better future, and a 'stronger together' vision.

To accomplish these, we need Open Spaces for peace, for social innovation and for sustainable and just transformation, through:

1. *Evaluating and implementing a peacebuilding process to create new spaces for urban development and shaping social innovation.*
2. *Opening more Peace Gardens - spaces to break down silos for a free flowing knowledge and decision-making process in nature and where utopia becomes reality. This process can help both sides share their cultural values and find creative solutions. This is an important start for healing traumas and offering communities an access to the transformation process.*
3. *Making it a legal requirement in new local-level urban development laws for developers and public bodies to provide everyone access to nature-rich local spaces, clean water and healthy food for justice.*
4. *Provide funding for locally accessible nature-rich spaces by extending the local initiatives to green infrastructure projects.*
5. *Building a new peace education program by using out-of-school methods, focusing on inclusivity, diversity, equity and overall sustainability and wellbeing of our social and ecological environments, which need to be at the center of our educational and professional paths.*
6. *Giving visibility for marginalized people in local level media spaces and political support, especially for women.*
7. *Promoting digital tools and art of neighbourhoods which have played a "bridge builder" role in creating dialogue and supporting culturally sensitive solutions and nonviolent language in these applications.*

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Peacebuilding is defined here as taking alternative actions on social inequality and ecological unsustainability in order to create more just and sustainable spaces. A narrow version of the peacebuilding term has begun to appear within the bodies of the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, other regional actors, the international legal system, and the international financial institutions.

<sup>2</sup> Open Spaces that not only includes physical open spaces but changes in gender equality, decision-making processes with marginalized groups, trust-building, social justice and so on to promote intensive growth patterns that ensure micro -individual- and local level sustainable and just structural changes for a common future.

<sup>3</sup> Marginalized and vulnerable groups in an urban context includes migrants, women, persons with disability and LGBTQ+ people, who continuously face systematic racism, violence and discrimination where they live.

<sup>4</sup> Sustainable and just cities enable overall quality of life and well-being, including social justice and ecological sustainability, for present and future generations. These aspirations are filled with inherent ambiguities, tensions and contradictions. Conflicts, viruses, ecological degradation, economic downfall, racism and other forms of injustice are all interconnected.

<sup>5</sup> Positive Peace is defined as the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies.

<sup>6</sup> It is an invitation for all parties for a constructive resistance and change that illustrates the strengths and potential of social innovations in manifold areas of social integration through education and poverty reduction, in establishing sustainable patterns of consumption, or in coping with demographic change. (Howaldt et. al. 2018, 2019). As Benoit Godin has pointed out in his manifold publications on the subject, the terms “social innovation” and “social innovator” first started appearing more frequently at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century -and hence, long before the technological and economic appropriation of the term “innovation” (2012, Chapter 1). Semantically, from the outset, they were closely linked to process of social transformation as specific forms of social change.

<sup>7</sup> A good example for such a knowledge power structure in field research was the urbanA project’s initiative. It started in Rotterdam, then continued in Barcelona and Berlin, before the last stop in Brussel. It was an idea to create a co-research process in between 2019 and 2021 by ICLEI, Central European University, Ecolise, Freiburg University, ICTA, Drift and Ulisboa. It received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, with the aim of being a part of just and sustainable urban development from a top-down and bottom-up perspective. Unfortunately, Covid-19 hit everywhere, and the two parts were held on digital environment and one was hybrid. This project aimed to reach communities, but the



education level of these people was not enough to make a scientific contribution to urban transformation. During the process, as a Peace Worker and fellow of this project, I proposed to Wuppertal Institute using facilitators like “bridge-builders” to build bridges with vulnerable and marginalised communities to be able to hear their voices, to show how mother language plays a huge role for building trust and implemented a peace project to prove that it is possible. This was the first step to establish a new dialogue method via Peacebuilders. What should be considered here is that communities have many deeply rooted traumas. Before the intervention, conflict and actor analyses are necessary for ensuring sustainable innovation.

<sup>8</sup> Existing power-knowledge structures are criticised by Oliver P. Richmond in his article on the evolution of the international peace architecture. In the urban context, the differences in knowledge about sustainability between developed, developing, and undeveloped countries are taken into account. In this context, sustainable information necessitates the creation of sharing areas for just and sustainable transformation to take place in cities, for example, in order to strengthen sustainable technological infrastructure.

<sup>9</sup> An Avantgardenist approach is a new method, which works in nature to build an agro-ecological relationship among plants, humans, and animals, especially amongst women and nature, in an experimental, radical or transformative manner with respect to art, culture and society.

<sup>10</sup> Urban Gardening Peace Project was founded in 2020 before COVID-19 hit the world. This science to practice field research project is based on five foundations.

- 1- *Inclusiveness: invite everyone – regardless of age, gender, political views or origin, and previous knowledge of gardening or peace work is not required.*
- 2- *Strengthening of women; encourage women to participate in the project, strengthen their social importance and include their creativity and collective knowledge about plants and seeds, medicinal properties etc.*
- 3- *Climate justice; contribute to more climate justice in an urban environment and more sustainable and more conscious behaviour.*
- 4- *Biodiversity; «nature is a network of diverse forms of life, everything is connected to everything. » and respect human dependence on nature as part of nature.*
- 5- *Peace; create and maintain peace, the framework – protected space and no tolerance for defamation or violence towards other people, neither in language nor in behaviour.*

<sup>11</sup> urbanA Project (2020). Sustainable and Just Cities: Rotterdam-Barcelona-Berlin-Brussel 4 Arenas. ICLEI, Central European University, Ecolise, Freiburg University, ICTA, Drift, Ulisboa.

<sup>12</sup> The Group of Seven (G7) is an informal forum of leading industrial nations and democracies. Alongside Germany, its members comprise Canada, France, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The European Union is also represented at all G7 meetings.

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She is a peace worker from Ankara, Turkey. She began her career in journalism and in 2013 she covered the Gezi Park Movement as a freelance journalist in alternative media and international press. She was a graduate degree student in Peace and Conflict Studies Hacettepe University's Istanbul branch from 2014 to 2017, where she was taught, among others, by Johan Galtung, Jorgen Johansen, Stellan Vinthagen, Oliver Richmond, Norman Finkelstein, Joshua Weiss, Wolfgang Dietrich, Gal Harmat, Kai Frithjof Brand-Jacobsen, Zeki Ergaş, Tatsushi Arai and Amr Khairy Abdalla. Hacettepe University shut down the department in 2015 but she obtained a graduate degree with the thesis subject being 'Identity-based Conflicts in between Resistance Groups during the Gezi Movement'. Since graduating from Hacettepe University in 2017, she was able to gain experience, inspire transformers and realise projects. As a trained peace-worker, she has been invited to present new ideas at international conferences and has intervened in interpersonal or intergroup conflicts as well as at the established organizational level. In her academic and practical approaches, she works for the creation of new social structures and implementation of state-of-the-art scientific solutions. In Wuppertal she founded the concept of nature-based micro-level peacebuilding methods that can be integrated into the real world. She cares deeply about a shared understanding of mutual respect. Above all, it is also important to her to take responsibility for future generations.

Burcu's "Urban Gardening Peace Project" won second place in the Audience Award at Go Volunteer Awards 2021, and third place at "Social Innovation" category. She was selected as a young scientist of the Right Livelihood Campus Bonn in 2021. She is an urbanA Fellow <https://urban-arena.eu/> and Istanbul Development Agency Climate Adaptation and Climate Justice Working Group Member.



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