

Multi-Stakeholder Engagement on Technology in Fragile Contexts:

Towards Transformative Partnerships and Positive Action

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This paper highlights the need for a systemic understanding of the uses and impacts of technology in fragile and conflict settings (FCS), and a bottom-up and people-centered approach to building sustainable partnerships. It sets out key initial steps to improve coordination between stakeholders and to fill gaps in research, understanding, and data.

This policy brief examines how we can build multi-stakeholder partnerships to bolster the contribution of information and communication technologies (ICT or “technology”) to peace and human security. Collaboration and partnering among diverse actors and building new types of mutual relationships is of critical importance to leveraging technology’s positive contributions to peace, development, and sustainable development goals (SDGs) and to avoid its abuse for the pursuit of conflict. Facilitating transformative partnerships requires constructive engagement between tech companies and local communities affected by their products, services, and business models. The proposals in this briefing paper provide a starting point for companies, civil society, academics, and policymakers to catalyze such engagement. This paper highlights the need for a systemic understanding of the uses and impacts of technology in fragile and conflict settings (FCS), and a bottom-up and people-centered approach to building sustainable partnerships. It sets out key initial steps to improve coordination between stakeholders and to fill gaps in research, understanding, and data. From this will follow the development of specific tools and guidance for tech companies working in FCS.

The policy brief is based on ideas developed in a discussion paper and a subsequent 2-day roundtable discussion with experts from the private sector, civil society organizations, community representatives and academia held in March 2021. It is intended to create momentum for change and positive action by business, government regulators, and NGOs as they respond to the increasing importance of digital technologies.

UNIQUE CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGAGING WITH THE TECH INDUSTRY

To facilitate effective partnerships for peace and human security, some specific features of the tech industry may require new thinking. The technology industry is unique in its business models, value propositions, size, speed of development, and global reach. The extent to which technology is now embedded in nearly all aspects of our lives and communities is particularly distinctive and impacts how transformative partnerships can be realized. This section sets out preliminary considerations for developing practice and behavioral changes for multi-stakeholder engagement.

Over-arching guidance is needed for all internet and digital technology companies, regardless of location, stage, or product/service. Tech companies are diverse and encompass a wide range of services, products, value propositions, and business models. Many current efforts to mitigate the harms of technology focus on specific product offerings or particular technologies, such as social media platforms or artificial intelligence. Different technology products, services, and diverse industry segments each present distinct challenges, and individual companies and contexts will require bespoke engagement strategies. However, there are general policies that can be useful across industry segments and the broad networks of stakeholders in this field. As such, this brief seeks to develop core concepts relevant to an expansive concept of the “tech industry” that includes companies (multinational as well as local), NGOs, trade associations, regulators, investors, academics and others working with and on internet communications and digital technology.

Effective engagement will depend on a deep context-specific understanding of how and why different technologies are used, and by whom. Technologies change quickly—as do their uses. Understanding the function of technologies in each context—such as data collection, communications, or networking—and how they are used by local actors is essential. People living in rural communities may access and use technology differently than their urban counterparts. Customers, users, and third parties can alter, limit, or expand one company’s technology into something unintended or unexpected by the original creator. Different considerations apply if the “user” is a community, state, government, or company. Some factors, such as adapting (or not) a certain user-interface or design, business model, product, or system to specific contexts may impact whether that technology contributes to harm. Understanding the ecosystem of technology functions and users is important for understanding the impact of technology and lay the groundwork for partnerships to mitigate harm and bolster benefits. However, there is still limited access to sufficient data and research on these issues. Inclusive partnerships can help fill that gap by providing systemic, context-specific information about how, why, and by whom tech is used in FCS.

Technology’s influence on conflict and peace is part of a deep ecosystem. The harms and benefits stemming from ICT are part of a complex and shifting system. For social media, for example, harms range from outright violence arising from hate speech and misinformation to negative

societal impacts such as polarization and ethnic divisions. However, current efforts to mitigate harms tend to focus on finite typologies of impacts. Social media companies frequently depend on communities to report harmful content to mitigate risks of violence. This approach may not work in all contexts, however, depending on cultural and contextual dynamics such as how users manage networks of trust offline, the cultural significance of reporting bad behavior from within the community, and what is considered harmful within that context. Addressing the harms or benefits of technology implicitly impacts other areas of the system—including at a geopolitical level—sometimes in unintended or unanticipated ways.

Identifying entry-points for engagement is challenging for companies with global users. The largest and most influential tech companies do not often operate in the countries where many of their users and customers are based. They are often owned, operated, and staffed by employees that are physically, linguistically, and culturally distant from a significant segment of their users. They have established company cultures and protocols that rarely consider complexities of doing business in FCS. These differences tend to impede effective communication and engagement between those companies and their users’ communities, resulting in more significant challenges in forming effective partnerships. Moreover, ICT is now a core part of nearly all global industries. Companies from other industries that are increasingly relying on technology—such as agriculture, extractives, garment, transportation, health, hospitality, publishing, or financial services—can also impact human security and create unintended negative consequences of technology.

Efforts to date have been ad hoc. To date, no multi-stakeholder process exists for the tech industry related to the need for local, context-specific approaches to doing business in FCS. However, many civil society organizations and communities—especially those based in FCS—are left out of conversations about changes they want to see in the technologies that so deeply influences their security. And those who do engage with companies are asking them to take on myriad issues, such as business and human rights, conflict sensitivity, responsible data, privacy, ethics, transparency, fair taxation, and sustainability. Given the speed of technology development and diversity of business models and technologies, there are gaps and incongruencies in capacities and efforts. Moreover, while each message is independently valuable and important, the lack of coordination and an

integrated approach means that multiple initiatives risk drowning each other out.

These are some of the many unique challenges that pertain to building effective multi-stakeholder partnerships to bolster the contribution of technology to peace and human security. Understanding the distinctive nature of the role of technology in conflict and of the tech industry itself drives the need and underlines the importance of a more structured and ongoing engagement through collaboration and partnership at the local level.

A SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK IS NEEDED FOR EFFECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

Connecting business and community to strengthen peace and human development is nothing new. With the tech industry, community engagement is particularly important. Technology impacts communities and societies in fundamental ways. It influences the way we think, act, speak with others, and live our lives. Technology companies often need to engage “at scale” and respond quickly—sometimes within hours—to serious risks. Addressing one risk can give rise to others previously unforeseen, and those risks will be different depending on the community and context. Traditional frameworks for addressing responsible business practices will not meet all of the needs to address and mitigate the risks of tech companies doing business in FCS. While much can be learned from experience with other industries doing business in FCS, the tech industry requires a bespoke framework that can address the integral nature of technology in our communities. Most existing approaches to framing engagement—needed for adopting a common language and goals, building in accountability for positive action—are based on human rights. Other important work has been done on conflict sensitivity for businesses, and ethical guidelines and policy approaches are increasingly popular in the tech industry. However, none of these existing approaches fully captures the opportunities and risks of technology in FCS. Specifically, work needs to be done to better incorporate and blend approaches to systemically encompass the nuances of working in FCS, the potential for positive impacts, and accountability.

A model developed by LSE IDEAS, the “Human Security Business Partnership Framework”, focuses on local empowerment, promising to build on and add new dimensions to existing, necessary approaches such as human rights, conflict sensitivity, corporate social responsibility,

and the “do no harm” principle.¹ It is a helpful, holistic starting point for engagement. Human security is people-centered and locally driven. It emphasizes the existence of broad interconnected threats but seeks to both protect against harms and provide more agency for individuals and communities to address threats and opportunities in ways which best reflect their needs, interests, capacities, and local dynamics. Under a human security framework, addressing the interlinked issues that undermine peoples’ welfare and life prospects requires meaningful engagement between technology companies and local communities as part of multistakeholder partnership. As discussed above, the distance between many tech companies from their users and users’ communities, tech business models, and the fundamental ways that technology is impacting humanity means that effectively addressing the risks of technology in FCS requires a deep and nuanced understanding of technology in that context and in dynamic conflict situations. In this way, companies can act proactively and preventatively to improve local contexts while benefiting both business and local people.² With its emphasis on broad, interconnected threats, human security approaches to engagement seek to mobilize those affected by business presence in collaborative efforts to find innovative and sustainable solutions that reflect their needs, interests, and capacities.

A human security approach would necessarily draw on other frameworks as well, including human rights, conflict sensitivity, and ethics. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights are a core and essential part of building partnerships on technology and FCS. Much important work has been done to mainstream the UNGPs and integrate effective human rights protections into business practices—including with the tech industry. There are some areas where human rights could be bolstered by other frameworks to help articulate broad and complex tech-related impacts at a societal and community level, and to move beyond a narrow focus on the “caused, contributed, or directly linked” approach to attributing responsibility for harms. Other approaches can also be helpful for deciding how to balance different rights—in FCS, protecting one human right may exacerbate the conflict or require balancing with other rights. This requires additional contextual knowledge and guidance. Human rights due diligence is also typically construed as a harm mitigation exercise, rather than as an opportunity for building positive, transformative changes to help reduce conflict and build peace. A conflict sensitivity approach would require “enhanced” human rights due diligence that also considers

1 LSE IDEAS, [People, Profits, and Peace](#).

2 LSE IDEAS, [People, Profits, and Peace](#).

conflict drivers and impacts of corporate actions on the conflict itself, in addition to human rights.³ This could prompt a broader understanding of risks related to business decisions and lead to better remedies for harm. Ethical guidelines and policies are also useful for guiding tech companies, especially when trying to build a culture and value system across a company. Ethical guidelines fall short of building in accountability for actions, however, and are also subjective to differing value systems. For FCS contexts, corporate ethics may not be sufficient to address conflict drivers nor harness the opportunity for building peace.

PRIORITIES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

To address the challenges to effective engagement between the tech industry and local stakeholders in FCS, especially typical users and marginalized communities, efforts need to be made in multiple priority areas. Some of the most pressing are discussed below.

FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS:

- 1. Support efforts to establish a multi-stakeholder process for applications of technology.** The Human Security Business Partnership Framework and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development draw on multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) as a critical tool. MSPs provide an opportunity to leverage the diverse strengths of multiple partners to develop innovative approaches to human security challenges in a way that is mutually beneficial. The hope is that collaboration through MSPs will allow stakeholders to align their diverse interests—including commercial and community-related—to generate transformation in wellbeing and sustainable development.
- 2. Develop a bespoke technology-in-conflict policy framework and implementation guidance.** A policy framework and an implementation strategy that reflect the complexity of these issues are needed. This framework needs to consider all relevant actors, harms, benefits, and specific actions that reflect a holistic and systemic picture of the full range of consequences of technology in FCS. To provide transparency and accountability, specific tools and guidance can help tech companies engage in “enhanced” due diligence for FCS and build community-level and multistakeholder engagement into existing policies and practice.

- 3. Engage in critical research to improve understanding and practice.** For all stakeholders, there are significant gaps in understanding that need to be filled to set and prioritize goals and actions. There is a gap in being able to interpret and act on data on which markets are high-risk, what makes them fragile, and conflict dynamics specific to each FCS context. There is also a gap in understanding the linkages between conflict, technology, and peace. Better data and analysis would help stakeholders move away from responding to crises and towards proactive prevention.
- 4. Plan for and accommodate discomfort and adversity. Community engagement in FCS requires time and energy to allow for difficult, sensitive, and potentially confrontational conversations and interventions.** All stakeholders need to plan and accommodate for the fact that working in FCS is challenging, emotionally taxing, and often requires difficult decisions to be made and actions to be taken urgently, at the risk of injury or loss of life for individuals.
- 5. Build inclusive engagement practices. Engagement between the tech industry and local communities must be inclusive of diverse actors and viewpoints.** Remote or rural territories, or those with security challenges are particularly complex in this regard. Engagement practices need to factor in how inclusion is perceived locally as well as the diverse expectations surrounding business-community dialogue.

FOR COMPANIES:

- 6. Prioritize sustained community engagement at all stages of product/service development.** Companies need to initiate dialogue with communities and civil society in FCS at all stages of the technology lifecycle—including design, development, and deployment. Community-based enhanced human rights due diligence can help prevent negative unintended risks and promote and support the benefits of technology in FCS in ways that work for people in FCS. It can also help get out in front of risks and facilitate responses with the immediacy and urgency required in FCS. That being said, tech companies need to be willing to engage with local partners on a long-term basis. A process of continuous and equitable engagement can build trust and commitment between companies and local actors, enabling the kinds of innovative and sustained collaboration that is so clearly needed.

3 JustPeace Labs, [Conflict Sensitivity for the Tech Industry](#) (2020).

7. Enhance and build capacity of internal teams to facilitate engagement. Multi-national companies should improve internal communications and connections with regional operations teams, giving locally- or regionally-based employees more leverage to effect relevant policy and practice changes. In addition, internal capacity building on community engagement would help support constructive, inclusive partnerships. Alternatively, or additionally, companies should explore complementary channels for engagement, such as through consultants, experts, and other third parties who can facilitate local engagement and input.

8. Support joint engagement and shared insights. Keeping in mind sensitivities related to competition and trade secrets, companies should share insights from engagement across the industry, rather than keeping them siloed internally. This would allow for shared learning and avoid the burden on communities who are repeatedly asked for input on the same issues by different companies and organizations. It would also support joint efforts to support peace and human security, prompting collaboration and industry-wide opportunities for good.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY:

9. Focus on commonalities and shared opportunities. To improve the quality of interactions and engagement, stakeholders must re-assess current practices and be encouraged to develop collaborative strategies that can articulate common risks, examine shared opportunities, and create possibilities for joint learning and problem solving. Communities and civil society organizations need to consider how to structure engagements to increase their access to and impact within tech companies. It is important to agree on what “progress” looks like in this respect, including articulating specific goals and starting points.

10. Coordinate engagement strategies within civil society. Effective, inclusive engagement also requires a commitment to cooperation and coordination among civil society actors. In developing common goals and strategies, civil society organizations need to address power imbalances within their own networks. They should also take steps to breakdown practice silos—

such as between the human rights, peacebuilding, and technology fields—and establish a shared language for action and change. They should bolster efforts to build communities of practice, engage in dialogue with other civil society actors, and understand different approaches and theories of change.

NEXT STEPS

The proposals in this briefing paper provide a starting point for companies, NGOs, and policy makers to catalyze more effective engagement between the tech industry and local stakeholders, particularly in FCS. These proposals are based on the idea of human security and adopting a relational approach that recognizes how stakeholders are connected in terms of the uses and impacts of technology. A bottom-up and people-centered approach that focuses on actual and everyday harms, that explores and analyses how the use of technology can be both positive and negative for peacebuilding and stability, would provide the basis for a new kind of sustained interaction between technology businesses and other actors in society. This relationship and ongoing collaboration can mitigate the risks of ICT in fragile settings and leverage its productive potential. This policy brief has set out some key initial steps to improve coordination between stakeholders, re-assess business strategies in the tech sector itself and among companies who deploy technology in other sectors, and to fill gaps in research, understanding, and data. From this will follow the development of specific tools and guidance for the tech industry working in FCS.

Priority should be placed on developing a matrix of users, harms, risks, and stakeholders. This can serve to highlight relevant relationships and interdependencies, and act as the basis for more detailed and locally specific analyses which companies, communities and NGOs can elaborate according to each regional national and local setting. Such a matrix could also lead to the development of early warning tools for fragile markets. Another priority is the development of a set of tools and guidelines that the tech sector—and any companies that integrally use technology—can draw on to help bolster their engagement strategies and make responsible decisions when doing business in FCS. ■

ABOUT JUSTPEACE LABS

[JustPeace Labs](#) supports ethical and responsible approaches to technology deployed in high-risk settings. Our work advances peace and human rights protections around the world through advocacy, awareness raising, and research on effectively shaping corporate policy on conflict-sensitive tech design and development. Striving for long-term solutions to hard problems, our approach aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Our dynamic international team has demonstrated experience in the fields of software development, peacebuilding, business and human rights, and corporate social responsibility. We have engaged with multinational technology companies on building human rights and conflict sensitivity norms into their business practices and are actively involved with academic research and international civil society mobilization efforts to strengthen partnerships between the tech industry and civil society. JustPeace Labs has published “[Conflict Sensitivity for the Tech Industry](#)” and “[Ethical Guidelines for PeaceTech](#),” and is preparing a third report on policy frameworks for technology in conflict.

ABOUT LSE IDEAS

[LSE IDEAS](#) is LSE’s foreign policy and strategy think tank, currently ranked the #1 global university-affiliated think tank. Through sustained engagement with policymakers and opinion-formers, IDEAS provides a forum that informs policy debate and connects academic research with practice. IDEAS hosts interdisciplinary research projects, produces working papers and reports, holds public and off-the-record events, and delivers cutting-edge executive training programs for government, business, and third-sector organizations.

LSE IDEAS published “[People, Profits, and Peace](#),” and is preparing a follow-up report for the UN Secretary-General on the Human Security Business Partnership Framework, a governance model developed with the UN to encourage positive collaborations between the private and public sectors and civil society to address a wide range of security needs on the ground, working towards the UN’s Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).