



## **Political epidemics and a global pandemic: Reverting to the pre-set or resorting to reset?**

Hindsight helps. In December, what could have been done better to prepare for and address a pandemic is much clearer than in months past. Though biological in nature, Coronavirus tested all our social, economic, financial and political systems to an unprecedented degree. On a personal level, it challenged us to live, work and engage with others in entirely new ways, or over platforms, we had only used occasionally in the past. The deadly and deeply disruptive impact of the virus cascaded quickly across human geography, political boundaries and social hierarchies. Some were affected far more than others. Others will suffer for far longer, even after vaccinations take place. It has been a year like no other.

In peacebuilding, we have long since recognized that only by protecting the most vulnerable - at the frontlines of or marked by conflict – can the entrenchment and expansion of violence be stymied. 2020 offers a similar lesson we ignore at our peril. Until and unless those most at risk of contracting or suffering the fallout of Coronavirus are protected and supported, we are all at risk. The danger is not just in the spread of disease, but a rise in violent conflict.

And therein lies the rub.

Populist leaders even in the West, more interested in their own sound over the science, move towards authoritarianism at pace. Understandable confusion, fear and anxiety arising from the pandemic are instrumentalized to whip up support for strongmen and undermine trust in democratic institutions. Science is attacked. Evidence is belittled. Track and trace technologies that aid the containment of Coronavirus risk silent transformation into pervasive surveillance architectures. Populist technocracies and authoritarian innovation weaponise social media to serve narrow ends. Though all this, what some countries have witnessed for years if not decades suddenly finds wider relevance and more global resonance. The resulting information disorders are at a scale not witnessed before.

These are volatile times. Receding hope and greater desperation are poor foundations for a just peace. The pandemic aside, 2020 witnessed how systemic racism, impunity and brutality diminish our shared humanity. When human dignity is attacked, democracy suffers. We observed how the elasticity of institutions to deal with the challenges of a pandemic is linked to the quality of moral leadership. Not unlike with peacebuilding, institutions that are open and responsive have dealt with the complex dynamics of the pandemic better than structures that are rigid and opaque.

Though there is no medical vaccination against hate entrepreneurs, ICT4Peace risks disappointment to hope the pandemic transforms approaches to human security, public health and associated challenges. These are at the heart of peace. The United Nations, as well as governments and civil society often see in silos what the pandemic clearly shows us are deeply interconnected issues. We believe the ‘new normal’ will continue to be a stochastic instability,

which demands new voices at the table to manage competently. The ‘table’ itself will need to radically change. As the power of old institutions to convene, coax and convince risks decline, a more diverse and dispersed, gendered and younger democratic leadership must emerge to tackle shared challenges.

We identified the need for this systemic reform before Coronavirus. From our inception nearly two decades ago, the work of ICT4Peace in countries across 6 continents focusses on how technology can strengthen human potential and our capacity to imagine, expand and sustain peace. Our vision and mission found new relevance in 2020, as communities in lockdown negotiated life – and their differences – almost completely online. The biological merged with the technological. Black Lives Matter, Cancel Culture, Superspreader, BIPOC, Covid-19 and Lockdown – some of the most important words of the year selected by the Oxford Dictionary – signified vital debates featured online, as much as they were played out – often violently - in the real world. That very term – the real world – came to mean something different. Our screens and social media supplanted, for hundreds of millions, interactions in person. Many more, however, remain disconnected and even more isolated than before. These are familiar challenges to the Foundation, and now, they are shared across the world.

Over 2020, colleagues from the Foundation were invited by the United Nations, universities, multilateral and bilateral platforms as well as independent media regulators to provide strategic input around how peace can be engineered during and after a pandemic. From the [future of peacekeeping and UN reform](#) to [grouthink](#) and [peacebuilding during the pandemic](#), our ideas, curation, writing and trusted guidance found resonance in multiple countries. ICT4Peace is associated with path-breaking research around how social media helped shape the response to the [Christchurch massacre in New Zealand](#). We conducted workshops on securing critical infrastructure in cyberspace at a time of unprecedented risks. In [Afghanistan and just before the pandemic](#), we helped train civil society leaders, activists and journalists on how best to use social media in their work. Colleagues working on [cybersecurity](#), [artificial intelligence](#), machine learning and ethics conducted workshops, gave presentations, wrote papers and were featured in the media. We helped [remember Jamal Khashoggi](#) and supported a call to bring his killers to justice.

Where to now? Do we go on as before? There is no question that Coronavirus lays bare the inequity and inequalities of our world. A Faustian bargain that secures public health and security at the cost of civil liberties, human rights and democracy is one model proposed by many. We propose another. Peace is contingent on the well-being of societies, embracing physical as well as mental health. Human security derives from inalienable rights, protected by the state. Our appreciation of one another and the negotiation of difference, if on social media, requires powerful companies to focus on the quality of engagement instead of violent virality. In these broad brushstrokes, we see the potential to further the Foundation’s values around how technology can be developed for and used in the service of justice, democracy and peace.

We are not alone in championing these ideas, but our work across the world remains a unique contribution to strengthen “the potential of ICTs to promote peace and to prevent conflict” noted in Paragraph 36 of the Tunis Commitment of the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

May I take this opportunity to wish our followers and supporters a very Happy and Coronavirus free New Year! Our work and journey onward continues.

Daniel Stauffacher  
President  
ICT4Peace Foundation

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