

# “I Feel the Constant Low-Hum of Anxiety”:<sup>(1)</sup> Peacebuilders’ Lived Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## I. Introduction

This timely paper offers an examination of the lived experiences of peacebuilders during the COVID-19 pandemic, discussing implications for post-pandemic peacebuilding. As of the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 2021, the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2021) reported over 239 million cases of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, with 4.9 million deaths globally. Zhai (2020) explained that COVID-19 was “a leading cause of death worldwide” (p.80). In addition to the health crisis, the pandemic caused significant setbacks in education, equality, peacebuilding, and poverty reduction (United Nations [UN], 2020). While “the virus has impacted everyone, it is affecting the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people the most” (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020, para.2).

Although it is too early to understand the long-term impact of the pandemic on peacebuilding, Eufemia et al. (2020) argued that “unforeseen global crises, like COVID-19, can endanger such projects” (p.385). UN Secretary-General António Guterres (2017~present) told the UN Security Council in July 2020 that the pandemic was “profoundly affecting” peace and security worldwide (para.1). Clark and Alberti (2020) argued that the pandemic highlighted limitations in liberal peacebuilding, relying “heavily on outside actors to carry out peacebuilding locally” (p.1). ‘Outside actors’ were no longer able to travel

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(1) Quotation from a participant in the study.

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freely. Gottlieb (2020) furthered that the pandemic resulted in “collective anxiety” and “collective loss” (para.1). Working in challenging contexts, as peacebuilders often do, may compound such experiences.

In this research, 27 peacebuilders from 13 nationalities reflected on their lived experience of the pandemic. Through an online survey and text-based interview, they shared how the pandemic affected them and their work in the peace sector. The study was unique because it drew on the expertise of Rotary Peace Fellows<sup>(2)</sup> and applied pervasive ambiguity as the theoretical foundation (Ball-Rokeach, 1973). I reveal that during the pandemic, the causes of peacebuilders’ anxiety were multi-faceted, such as concerns about cybersecurity when online peacebuilding, financial worries, cancelled peacebuilding projects, and insecurity. To address the multi-layered challenges, I suggest humanitarian and aid organisations offer employees comprehensive details about COVID-19 and their work, including guidelines to help them stay safe in their field location. Organisations should also provide flexible working hours to help peacebuilders reduce tension and support those with responsibilities, like caregiving. Resiliency Training for staff would also be beneficial. Finally, drawing on the opportunities peacebuilders in the study experienced, organisations should facilitate global networking opportunities post-pandemic. In the following paper, I provide the background to the research, research design, thematic results, research significance, and discussion, finishing with conclusions and recommendations.

## **II. Background to the Research**

### **1. Peacebuilding**

‘Peacebuilding’ was conceptualised by UN Secretary-General Boutros

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- (2) Rotary Peace Fellows are “peace and development professionals or practitioners” engaged in “academic training, practice, and global networking opportunities” provided by The Rotary Foundation to become “effective catalysts for peace” (Rotary International, n.d, para.1). Rotary Peace Fellows undertake “fellowships for master’s degrees or certificate studies at premier universities” worldwide (Rotary International, n.d, para.4). In 2021, there were over 1,400 Rotary Peace Fellows globally.

Boutros-Ghali (1992-1996) in ‘Agenda for Peace’, June 1992. Boutros-Ghali (1992) considered peacebuilding to be the identification and support of “structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse into conflict” (p.5). With this objective in mind, the UN advocated liberal peacebuilding, a universalistic blueprint for peace. Liberal peacebuilding, among other aspects, promoted liberal democracies through multi-party elections and transformation to market-orientated economies (Paris, 2010). Despite the UN’s commitment to liberal peacebuilding, Futamura, Newman, and Tadjbakhsh (2010) argued that “liberal institutionalist peacebuilding often neglects the welfare needs of local populations” (p.3). Afghanistan is an example of liberal peacebuilding failing to account for the needs of the local population, of which the Taliban are members. Khalid and Mushtaq (2020) explained that “the Taliban have continuously demanded the removal of international armed forces from Afghanistan” (p.529). Hence, despite two decades of liberal peacebuilding intervention in Afghanistan, Khalid and Mushtaq (2020) concluded that “the liberal values that are imposed and necessitated by the external powers [have] alienated the people” (p.537).

Liberal peacebuilding projects face scrutiny, and the academic debate persists (see Hinton et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the term ‘peacebuilding’ is commonly used in academia and humanitarian and aid organisations to describe their work. International Alert (n.d) stated that “peacebuilding is about dealing with the reasons why people fight in the first place and supporting societies to manage their differences and conflicts without resorting to violence” (para.1). The UN (n.d) furthered that “peacebuilding aims to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development” (para.9). Rotary International (n.d) explained that peacebuilders are thus “creating environments where peace can be built and maintained”, supporting “lasting change” (para.7). While the definitions of peacebuilding differ, there are commonalities in its conceptualisation. Peacebuilding, conducted by peacebuilders, strengthens societies to avoid lapsing or relapsing

into violence (see Boutros-Ghali, 1992; International Alert, n.d; Rotary International, n.d; UN, n.d).

## **2.The Pandemic and Threats to Peacebuilding**

The pandemic resulted in global peacebuilding setbacks. Guterres (2020) explained that as the international community remained “distracted” by the pandemic, fragile peace processes unravelled, “vulnerabilities become more entrenched [and] the potential for violence only grows” (as cited in Security Council, para.4). In South Sudan, pandemic restrictions diverted focus from peacebuilding as it reached the signing of the peace agreement by the transitional government (Conducive Space for Peace & Peace Direct [CSP & PD], 2020). Likewise, online peacebuilding techniques made it challenging to establish trust between already suspicious parties (Guterres as cited in Security Council, 2020). The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2021) furthered that “100 million additional children will fall below the minimum proficiency level in reading as a result of the health crisis” (para.1). The UN (2021) reported that “the impact of conflicts old and new, climate shocks and COVID-19, in addition to a lack of funding, have left millions more on the verge of famine” (para.1).

In April 2020, CSP & PD consulted with 400 peacebuilders in 60 States worldwide. They asked “how their lives and work have been affected by this unprecedented health emergency, what their communities need, and how they see their role during this time of crisis” (CSP & PD, 2020, p.2). CSP & PD (2020) reported that the pandemic exacerbated “the underlying roots of conflict, particularly inequality” (p.2). Hege (2020) explained that in Colombia, “the pandemic has only intensified the country’s myriad sub-national conflict dynamics. Armed groups and criminal networks have adapted quickly to changing circumstances, seizing on the national quarantine to fortify their control over communities” (para.4). CSP & PD (2020) also identified that “some governments are exploiting the crisis to further their agenda” (p.2). Worldwide, States “have introduced severe limitations on the freedom of assembly...in

many cases complemented by restrictions on further civil and political rights” (Bethke & Wolff, 2020, p.1). In Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, violent repressions against freedom of movement and assembly were recorded (Bethke & Wolff, 2020). Interpeace (n.d) furthered that “in 2020, political instability deteriorated in 46 States [and] more than 5,000 violent incidents associated with COVID-19 occurred” (p.18).

The scholarship concerning COVID-19 and peacebuilding are closely tied to the pandemic’s broader implications for peace and conflict at the community and State level (see CSP & PD, 2020; Eufemia et al., 2020; Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding [CSPS], 2020). The lived experiences of peacebuilders were not centralised in existing studies. Thus, it is difficult to appreciate the implications of the pandemic on peacebuilders. Still, CSP & PD (2020) noted that peacebuilders struggled with changes in their work environments and mental health issues. Peacebuilders experienced isolation because of lockdowns and “a high degree of uncertainty...on how to sustain their work, now and after the crisis” (CSP & PD, 2020, p.6). Admittedly, isolation and uncertainty are not specific to peacebuilders. The Centre for Workplace Mental Health (n.d) claimed that the pandemic’s disruption would inevitably “lead to anxiety and stress” (p.1). Arthur (2020) explained that “we are in the midst of...a prolonged crisis, with little certainty about what the immediate future will bring” (para.3). As peacebuilders often work in challenging contexts, their experience of anxiety and stress may be profound.

### **3. The Pandemic and Opportunities in Peacebuilding**

CSP & PD (2020) highlighted opportunities to advance peace during the pandemic. A ceasefire in April 2020 was agreed upon in Yemen to prevent the virus’ spread (CSP & PD, 2020, p.3). However, the ceasefire was short-lived as fighting between the Houthi movement’s forces and Yemen’s Saudi-backed government erupted again in October 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2020). Nevertheless, the initial ceasefire demonstrated that peacebuilding during the pandemic continued. Interpeace (n.d) revealed that “in Ukraine...work on health and peace is helping

to...restore the social contract between the State and its citizens” (p.19). They identified that effective health responses to the pandemic supported trust-building between States and citizens (Interpeace, n.d). The CSPS (2020) furthered that Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) mobilised to support community health and wellbeing, monitoring the pandemic’s impact on vulnerable populations. For example, in Ghana, “community volunteers go around with their megaphone to encourage people to observe the lockdown and stay indoors...and remain disciplined to the hygiene protocols” (CSP & PD, 2020, p.4).

### **III. Theoretical Foundation of the Research**

I used pervasive ambiguity (Ball-Rokeach, 1973) to guide the study during the research design. Ball-Rokeach (1973) defined pervasive ambiguity as “when individuals or collectives are unable to define a social situation” (p.378). To overcome pervasive ambiguity, one “must resolve fundamental questions of meaning, such as what is happening and why” (Ball-Rokeach, 1973, p.379). During pervasive ambiguity, individuals “have no way of knowing how they could or should interact with others or with the environment” (Ball-Rokeach, 1973, p.379). Ball-Rokeach (1973) explained that those experiencing pervasive ambiguity engaged in a “pattern of adaption” through a “cyclical shifting back and forth between information seeking and tension reduction behaviours” (p.378). In the study, I asked questions like, “How would you describe the COVID-19 pandemic in three words?” to understand how participants defined the situation. I also asked, “How do you think ambiguity during the pandemic is affecting those in peacebuilding?” and “What methods do you employ to cope with ambiguity in your peacebuilding role/s?” to establish if participants engaged in the ‘cyclical shifting’. Still, I did not attempt to establish whether the pandemic was a period of pervasive ambiguity. However, I recognised that the pandemic was a situation whereby the risks of decisions were unclear for individuals lacking recent experience with a pandemic on this scale. Pervasive ambiguity encouraged centralising the lived experiences of individual

peacebuilders in data collection and analysis. Existing literature on COVID-19 and peacebuilding primarily focused on group, community, and State-level experiences (see CSP & PD, 2020; CSPS, 2020). In contrast, pervasive ambiguity supported the exploration of individuals’ actions and lived experiences.

## **IV. Research Design**

In this exploratory research, I collected qualitative data from surveys and text-based interviews to gather empirical evidence on peacebuilders’ lived experiences during the pandemic. I aimed to understand how the pandemic affected them and their work in the peace sector.

### **1. Research Question**

I examined, “What challenges and opportunities have peacebuilders experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic?” to explore their lived experiences of the pandemic, including how they coped during this uncertain period.

### **2. Methods for Data Collection**

I collected qualitative data remotely from voluntary participants recruited through social media between June and August 2020. My methods included a semi-structured survey of 20 questions shared in a closed Facebook group for Rotary Peace Fellows and through an email to the Rotary Peace Fellow community (see footnote 2). I included Rotary Peace Fellows in the study as I am a member of the network, providing access to peacebuilders worldwide. I distributed the survey via a Google Form. In addition to the survey, I interviewed participants through a semi-structured text-based interview of 16 questions via a Google Form. Complying with the most rigorous data protection legislation, such as General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe, I collected anonymous data, excluding certain personal data.

I selected a survey and text-based interview as instruments for data

collection to include breadth and depth in the data. I collected data online because I intended for my research to reach participants worldwide in various time zones and contexts. It was also important for individuals with differing English language skills to contribute. In advance of data collection, four academic colleagues tested the survey. I adjusted the survey based on their feedback, including providing additional options for participants to choose the type of work they engaged in, reflecting the diversity of peacebuilding. The questions in the text-based interview followed directly from the survey questions and answers, asking for further details.

### **3. Research Participants**

I collected survey data from 27 self-identifying peacebuilders, who were predominantly Rotary Peace Fellows. The participants were located worldwide from 13 nationalities, with the most frequent nationality being American. Fourteen of the participants were not living in the State of their nationality. Concerning their peacebuilding work, 17 selected that they were involved in peace-related research. Furthermore, I interviewed three peacebuilders. They volunteered for the interview after completing the survey and were American, Brazilian, and Nigerian.

### **4. Data Analysis**

In thematic data analysis, I used Quirkos to examine themes and patterns in the data. I identified patterns through inductive coding, which I checked through re-coding before finalising the analysis themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Inductive coding allowed the themes for analysis to emerge directly from the peacebuilder's words.

### **V. Research Significance**

This paper provides humanitarian and aid organisations with empirical evidence on the lived experiences of peacebuilders during the pandemic, helping them understand and subsequently address the challenges discovered. The



results particularly identify causes of uncertainty and ambiguity for peacebuilders during the pandemic and offer insight into their mental health. It is vital to understand and address the pandemic’s impact on peace, not just at State or organisational levels, but at the grassroots with individual peacebuilders. Otherwise, post-pandemic peacebuilding may be limited by the challenges that peacebuilders faced during the pandemic that were not addressed. Centralising peacebuilders in the study allowed me to explore the lived experiences of those who worked at the forefront of society strengthening and violence prevention during the pandemic.

## **VI. Thematic Results**

The creation of 188 codes revealed eight themes in the data relating to the research question “What challenges and opportunities have peacebuilders experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic?” As one participant highlighted, the responses in the study “differ greatly depending on the area of work, location and the organisation” peacebuilders worked for. Nevertheless, the following section offers insight into the key challenges and opportunities experienced by the study’s participants, including mental health concerns, online peacebuilding, and insecurity.

### **1. Challenges During the Pandemic**

The first theme, ‘experiencing mental health concerns’, surfaced from peacebuilders identifying that the pandemic decreased their mental health. When asked to describe the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, three participants used “fear”. One elaborated that they had a “fear of infection”. Furthermore, this paper is titled using the words of a participant who said that they “have lots of emotional ups and downs and feel the constant low-hum of anxiety and stress”. The implication of ongoing anxiety and stress on mental health is profound. The WHO (n.d) explained that “fear, worry, and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats” (para.1). Worldwide, during the pandemic, people experienced decreasing mental health when “faced with new realities of working

from home, temporary unemployment, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends, and colleagues” (WHO, n.d, para.2). The peacebuilders in this research were no exception to experiencing decreasing mental health.

The second theme related to ‘experiencing anxiety and insecurity’ at work. This theme arose from the differing ways peacebuilders experienced ambiguity and felt threatened in their work during the pandemic. Sixty-three per cent of participants suffered an increase in work-related anxiety, and 89 per cent experienced an increase of uncertainty in their peacebuilding activities. Several participants reported that they endured “threats to job security”. Participants also faced an inability to plan future peacebuilding projects and concerns that the pandemic would undo previous peacebuilding successes. A participant identified the difficulty they met in the “inability to plan ahead”. Financial worries about funding for peacebuilding projects and salaries emerged as a significant issue under this theme. One participant explained that financial limitations changed the “viability of projects [and] roles”.

The third theme related to challenges ‘experiencing COVID-19 protection measures’. This theme emerged from travel restrictions on peacebuilding projects as well as remote-working and physical distancing negatively affecting relationships with colleagues and stakeholders. One participant explained that “access to communities has been severely limited”. Another aptly said, “staying at home was a luxury only few could afford”. Also, several participants discussed challenges in their relationships with colleagues and stakeholders. One stated, “it is more difficult to build relationships, morale, and teams without in-person interaction”. Another identified that “many training [was] cancelled or postponed”. A participant furthered that “some of the decisions being made reflect the situation in the country where [the] headquarters is located, not necessarily the situation in the field”. This participant concerningly suggested that their employers’ responses to the pandemic were not always suitable or relevant for peacebuilders working in different States worldwide.

The fourth theme was concerned with ‘the role of online peacebuilding’. It

surfaced from the challenges of conducting peacebuilding remotely. Only 25 per cent of peacebuilders in the survey stated that their use of technology for peacebuilding activities had not changed since the pandemic began. This shift to online peacebuilding for the remaining 75 per cent implies considerable changes in their peacebuilding work. Challenges for peace researchers in the study included delays with in-person fieldwork and last-minute changes to research projects. Other peacebuilders experienced issues with stakeholders being excluded from peacebuilding projects. One said, “it has become more difficult to include people on the periphery of organisations or groups. It has privileged those who are more comfortable with technology or written communication” and “Internet access and online security [are] major challenges”. Cybersecurity and access to the Internet were considerable concerns for conducting peacebuilding online. As Hyder (2020) argued, “a world reliant on social distancing or technological aids is not a world accessible to the majority” (p.270).

The fifth theme, ‘experiencing gender inequality’, arose from peacebuilders facing gender inequality and seeing it within society. Two participants highlighted a lack of childcare as a work-related challenge and a cause of anxiety. One shared, “I had to stop [peacebuilding] during lockdown due to having my children at home”. Another participant said, “the applications for the women’s [community] space are reduced to zero, including the [female] volunteers for the initiative”. The WHO (2020) explained that the pandemic affected women and men differently because “as women’s care burden has increased, livelihoods are affected, access to basic necessities are reduced, social and protective networks are disrupted” (p.1).

The sixth theme, ‘society and the pandemic’, emerged from fears peacebuilders raised about the impact of the pandemic on the wider society. When asked to describe the pandemic in three words, one participant said we live in a “world-under-threat”. Another shared concern about the pandemic resulting in societal “food insecurity and loss of jobs”. When asked what changes occurred in their peacebuilding work during the pandemic because of

personal factors, such as changing motivation, others expanded that they experienced a shift in their perception of the ethics of liberal peacebuilding. One explained that they were “deeply questioning the ethical implications of the systems we are creating and engaging in”. When asked what surprised them most about their peacebuilding activities during the pandemic, another said the “levels of dehumanisation as a result of COVID-19”. A second furthered that “the pandemic has revealed social inequities and injustices like never before”.

The seventh theme, ‘dealing with ambiguity’, evolved from how peacebuilders dealt with and managed uncertainty during the pandemic. The results indicate that some peacebuilders engaged in information-seeking behaviour, while others sought distractions from reality. One participant explained, “I try to maintain a good routine at home [and I] try to channel my anxiety in new skills”. Another said they have dealt with the ambiguity by “communication, staying in touch with [the] community” and “meditation”, implying information-seeking through communication and tension reduction through meditation. Evidence that peacebuilders had different techniques for dealing with ambiguity suggests no recognised method among the peacebuilding community to cope with uncertainty. Each participant chose the manner they thought was suitable and applicable to their situation. One even claimed, “I embrace ambiguity”.

## **2. Opportunities During the Pandemic**

The eighth theme related to opportunities peacebuilders experienced personally and professionally during the pandemic. While 93 per cent of participants experienced threats in their peacebuilding work, 74 per cent also experienced opportunities. Opportunities in the ‘benefits of remote working’ emerged, including participants sharing that they had more “time”. One participant said that “working remotely and being more connected with other peacebuilders around the world has been a tremendous benefit for me”. Another highlighted that physical and social distancing had “minimised distractions from normal life”. These data illustrate that while most participants experienced an

increase in anxiety and exposure to threats during the pandemic, 20 out of 27 also experienced opportunities in working remotely.

## **VII. Discussion**

### **1. Multi-Layered Challenges**

This research demonstrates that the challenges peacebuilders faced during the pandemic were multi-layered and contributed to decreasing mental health. The 14 participants not living in the State of their nationality faced additional difficulties. Rowlinson (2020) identified that possible problems for “ex-pats” during the pandemic included “draconian quarantine rules” preventing travel to visit friends and family, living with inadequate or inaccessible healthcare provision, or being the victim of “anti-foreigner sentiment” and stigma because of COVID-19 (para.2). Also, participants identified that the pandemic resulted in their employers cancelling planned training. Indeed, the experience of cancellations and closures were not unusual during the pandemic. UNESCO (2021) highlighted that “close to half the world’s students are still affected by partial or full school closures” (para.1). Nevertheless, when peacebuilders cannot access required training, especially if stationed abroad and in the field, they may face additional physical or mental risks in their work.

An inability to plan peacebuilding projects, changes to funding, salaries, and the lack of finance for non-health/COVID-19 related research were other causes of ambiguity for peacebuilders. The CSP (2020) noted that the reduction in funding was “particularly affecting smaller organisations” (para.22). Without funding, peacebuilders could not deliver projects and engage with local communities (CSP, 2020). Kessler (2020) identified that an inability to make plans during the pandemic caused “anticipatory grief...that feeling we get about what the future holds when we’re uncertain” (as cited in Berinato, para.5). The results indicate that financial issues combined with project uncertainty during the pandemic affected peacebuilders’ mental health. A possible future implication to peacebuilding is a loss of talented peacebuilders as they seek alternative employment that offers stability and less mental health strain.

## **2. Pervasive Ambiguity**

While I do not claim that the pandemic was a period of pervasive ambiguity, participants identified that they shifted between seeking information about COVID-19 and trying to reduce tension (Ball-Rokeach, 1973). This finding is notable, as it suggests that humanitarian and aid organisations experiencing uncertainty should vary their approach to support employees. Organisations would benefit from offering employees details about COVID-19, its impact on their work, and guidelines to help them stay safe in their field location. They should also consider providing flexibility in working hours so that employees can engage in alternative coping mechanisms to reduce tension, such as meditation. Flexible working hours would also support those with responsibilities, like caregiving.

## **3. Peacebuilders' Resilience**

The results on declining mental health imply that the peacebuilders in the study would benefit from greater resilience. CSP & PD (2020) identified that “this crisis puts a previous lack of focus on resilience in the spotlight” (p.6). Interpeace (n.d) envisioned “a world in which enduring peace is evident in the cohesion and resilience of citizens” (p.1). Humanitarian and aid organisations could support employees by providing participatory Resilience Training to help them manage their work during crises. The Support for Effective Cooperation and Coordination of the Cross-border Initiatives (SECCI) (n.d) identified that participatory Resilience Training supported “understanding how people think, feel, and behave”, helping “shape conflict intervention and peacebuilding approaches that can be matched to community needs” (p.viii) (see also World Vision UK, 2013).

## **4. Online Peacebuilding**

The pandemic supported the rapid development of remote working and online communication software (Kalia, 2020). Interpeace (n.d) reported that in

Burkina Faso, online peacebuilding “allowed us [peacebuilders] to express ourselves without being interrupted and above all without having to cross the border” (p.46). However, Clark and Alberti (2020) highlighted that online peacebuilding “forces us to consider issues like capacity, accessibility, the ability to build trust virtually, and the cultural appropriateness of a digital approach” (p.2). Van Dijk (2020) argued that the “pandemic reinforces both existing social inequalities and digital inequality” (p.1). Indeed, the UN in 2020 found that Violence Against Women facilitated by Information and Communication Technology (ICT) increased globally “in a context of wide-spread systemic gender-based discrimination” (p.2).

This research reveals that peacebuilders were concerned about online peacebuilding favouring those privileged with Internet access and digital skills. Peacebuilders and stakeholders who lacked access to the Internet or digital skills were excluded from online peacebuilding opportunities. This reality is concerning considering that “women [are] 1.6 times more likely than men to report lack of skills as a barrier to Internet use” (West, Ei Chew, & Krau, 2019, p.17). For peace-related research conducted remotely, the voices of those without Internet access and digital skills will likely become absent. Online peacebuilding may reduce the impact of peace projects, decrease stakeholder participation, and exacerbate existing social inequalities (van Dijk, 2020). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of online peacebuilding lacks research. Future studies would be beneficial to assess its effectiveness and limitations.

## **5. Opportunities Experienced**

Not all participants experienced challenges during the pandemic personally or in their peacebuilding work. Some participants experienced an opportunity to connect remotely with peacebuilding colleagues worldwide. Others explained that “the great pause” offered during the pandemic provided them with more time to engage in peacebuilding, as the demands of their daily life were lessened (Ross, 2020, para.1). Incidentally, Ross (2020) identified, “the Chinese symbol for crisis combines the symbols for danger and opportunity” (para.1). While 25

peacebuilders in the study experienced threats in their peacebuilding work during the pandemic, 20 participants also experienced opportunities. The combination of challenges and opportunities implies that peacebuilders' lived experiences during the pandemic were not entirely negative or positive, though their exposure to threats increased.

Other participants reported that this same 'pause' placed additional responsibilities on them, such as childcare and home-schooling. These responsibilities forced them to reduce their peacebuilding work. The results suggest that the context in which peacebuilders live and work was important in whether the pandemic was a period of challenge, opportunity, or both. Humanitarian and aid organisations should be sensitive to peacebuilders' context when supporting them now and in the future. Employees with caregiving responsibilities are unlikely to gain extra time during 'pauses'. In the pursuit of equity and equality, organisations must take note of this reality for employees with other responsibilities and provide the support that accounts for their situation.

## **VIII. Research Limitations**

A limitation of the study was that only participants with Internet access and digital skills contributed. Future peace research would benefit from understanding more about the lived experiences of peacebuilders who lacked Internet access or digital skills during the pandemic. A second limitation was my inexperience with GDPR compliance. Consequently, I did not obtain more detailed demographic data from participants, including the participant's gender identity. Future research with a smaller pool of participants located in fewer States would overcome this limitation. Also, my objectivity is a limitation because I identify as a peacebuilder and experienced challenges during the pandemic.

## **IX. Concluding Remarks**

This timely paper reveals that peacebuilders worldwide experienced



challenges in their personal lives and work in the peace sector during the pandemic. Unlike other studies examining peacebuilding during the pandemic, this paper centralises the lived experiences of peacebuilders, applying pervasive ambiguity as a theoretical lens. The results show that peacebuilders faced increasing uncertainty, decreasing their mental health. Peacebuilders experienced anxiety about Internet access and digital skills when online peacebuilding, financial worries, the cancellation of planned peace projects, and insecurity. This paper also reveals fears about the future of post-pandemic peacebuilding. If talented peacebuilders continue to have their salaries reduced and experience declining mental health, they may leave the humanitarian and aid sector. It is concerning that “what started as a health emergency...has morphed into a multi-faceted crisis of trust in our systems and institutions that will linger, and possibly fester, for years to come” (Weber as cited in Interpeace, n.d, p.7). However, the data also shows that some peacebuilders experienced benefits in their personal and professional lives. Remote working supported them to extend their network of colleagues worldwide. Overall, this research helps humanitarian and aid organisations consider what support and training peacebuilders need to be mentally healthy and continue their essential work. Organisations should offer employees comprehensive details about COVID-19 and their work, including guidelines to help them stay safe in their field location. They should also provide flexible working hours and Resiliency Training for peacebuilders. Finally, drawing on the opportunities peacebuilders in the study experienced, organisations should facilitate global networking opportunities post-pandemic.

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## **"I Feel the Constant Low-Hum of Anxiety": Peacebuilders' Lived Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### <Summary>

Lorraine J. Hayman

This research provides a timely examination of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected peacebuilders, discussing implications for post-pandemic peacebuilding. In the study, 27 peacebuilders worldwide from 13 nationalities reflected on their lived experience of the pandemic. Through an online survey of 20 questions and a text-based interview of 16 questions, they shared insights into how the pandemic affected them and their work in the peace sector. The study was unique because it drew on the expertise of Rotary Peace Fellows and applied pervasive ambiguity as the theoretical foundation (Ball-Rokeach, 1973). Ball-Rokeach (1973) defined pervasive ambiguity as "when individuals or collectives are unable to define a social situation" (p.378). There was no research on the pandemic utilising pervasive ambiguity that placed the lived experiences of Rotary Peace Fellows and those identifying as peacebuilders as the central focus. Rotary Peace Fellows are "peace and development professionals or practitioners" engaged in "academic training, practice, and global networking opportunities" provided by The Rotary Foundation to become "effective catalysts for peace" (Rotary International, n.d, para.1). Rotary Peace Fellows undertake "fellowships for master's degrees or certificate studies at premier universities" worldwide (Rotary International, n.d, para.4). In 2021, there were over 1,400 Rotary Peace Fellows globally.

The results reveal eight themes relating to the research question "What challenges and opportunities have peacebuilders experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The pandemic decreased peacebuilders' mental health

due to increasing ambiguity and anxiety. The causes of this anxiety included financial concerns and the inability to conduct pre-planned peacebuilding projects. In their work, peacebuilders experienced changes in relationships with colleagues and stakeholders because of interpersonal barriers due to physical distancing measures. More broadly, peacebuilders reflected on the extent of social inequality exacerbated by the pandemic. One elaborated that they were “deeply questioning the ethical implications of the systems we are creating and engaging in”. This paper also reveals fears about the future of post-pandemic peacebuilding. If talented peacebuilders continue to have their salaries reduced and experience declining mental health, they may leave the humanitarian and aid sector. However, the data also reveals that while 93 per cent of participants experienced threats in their peacebuilding work, 74 per cent also experienced opportunities. Benefits included remote working enabling peacebuilders to develop their network of colleagues worldwide. Overall, this research helps humanitarian and aid organisations consider what support and training peacebuilders need to be mentally healthy and continue their essential work. These organisations can address the issues identified in this paper and help protect the future of peacebuilding.