PeaceTech Founders Forum Brief

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To better understand the support that PeaceTech ventures require, the authors facilitated a Founders Forum at the Build Peace conference in Nairobi, organized by Build Up from December 1-3, 2023.

1. Context

Recent gatherings such as the Global PeaceTech Conference in Florence in November 2022, and the Designing Tech for Social Cohesion conference in San Francisco in February 2023, made clear the growing need for collaboration between civil society, government, and the private sector to address the role of technology as a driver of conflict. It is also clear that creative and considered applications of technology can make practical and strategic contributions to the efforts of peacebuilders and policymakers to build an equitable and just future.

There is thus demand in all three of these sectors for a new kind of professional expertise that marries technological skill and understanding with social and political acumen. Indeed, the potential for collaborative and impactful initiatives to regulate and constructively deploy technology depends on more than a high-level vision; it depends on the supply of talent who can put wheels to this vision. It requires humanist engineers and policy wonks who can code. And it requires interdisciplinary teams with the capacity to bring together peace and tech.

PeaceTech start-ups can play a crucial role in meeting this demand by developing, testing, and validating promising ideas that can then be leveraged by NGOs, governments, and established tech companies. Start-ups also provide a fertile context to nurture a new generation of tech-savvy peace professionals. Thus, we are convinced that incubating start-ups is a key way to grow the PeaceTech movement.

2. Process

The PeaceTech Founders Forum was held over a three-hour workshop time slot on the final afternoon of the Build Peace conference, and it provided the opportunity for the founders of nine PeaceTech ventures to connect, reflect, and learn from each other's experiences.

The time opened and closed with a circle process—rooted in Indigenous traditions—that values all aspects of human experience and aims to provide a space where people feel safe to speak in their authentic voice and to connect to others in a good way. In between the circles, there were three rounds of simultaneous conversation cafés in three different rooms. The following questions were used to guide each conversation, and one participant took notes on flip chart paper:

— What is a challenge you have faced and overcome as a founder?

— What is a challenge that your venture has faced and overcome?

— What are ways that PeaceTech founders could be better supported?

3. Insights

The nine participants in the Nairobi PeaceTech Founders Forum came from nine different countries and brought with them experiences with very different types of ventures, including networks and programs within existing organizations in addition to tech start-ups. They all demonstrated an admirable degree of vulnerability while sharing frank reflections, and there was a significant degree of synergy and resonance in their comments. We have attempted to synthesize these reflections using two broad categories to summarize the existing and desired supports that either have enabled or will be needed to overcome challenges:

1. Community

It was clear that PeaceTech founders face a myriad of challenges common to any tech start-up, while also needing to address additional expectations familiar to any social entrepreneur. It can be hard for start-ups to remain focused on their core mission, and it can be hard for founders to persevere given the personal sacrifices required. Thus, PeaceTech founders yearn for connections with peers or counterparts to share opportunities for:

— Mutual learning – to avoid or address predictable technical and business development roadblocks.

— Organizational culture-building – as they recruit, motivate, and retain teams with the right skillset and mindset, and at the right time for their stage of development.

— Personal care – as they navigate shared challenges with loneliness, self-confidence, interpersonal conflict, burnout, self-discovery, etc.

2. Champions

It was also clear that PeaceTech founders need external support if they are going to be able to overcome challenges that inhibit the viability and growth of the PeaceTech movement more generally. Given the attention and energy that their ventures require, they can't be expected to have the capacity to address broader audiences and stakeholders—they need champions who can leverage their experiences to blaze that trail with:

— Funders – who typically have unrealistically ambitious project timeframes, if they even recognize PeaceTech as a legitimate sector or domain.

— Government policymakers – who are typically too slow-moving and risk-adverse to recognize the potential impacts of PeaceTech.

— NGO and community partners – who typically do not include R&D or sufficient capital in project or program budgets or have a sufficient grasp of the development process for PeaceTech.

4. Recommendations and next steps

The objective of the PeaceTech Founders Forum pilot in Nairobi was to start building a community of founders while we gauge interest from different stakeholders. Our ambition is to take the learnings and feedback from the initial events and develop a roadmap for how we can continue to grow and support this community.

In the medium term, this work could include:

— Facilitating a PeaceTech Founders Network to enable ongoing connections and mutual support.

— Curating a companion network of incubators and/or individual mentors willing to share expertise and connections upon request.

— Organizing subsequent in-person and virtual PeaceTech Founders Forums in conjunction with subsequent regional or global peacebuilding conferences or other gatherings.

In the longer term, this work could include:

— Facilitating connections between PeaceTech start-ups and potential funders and partners.

— Collaborating to inspire and support the development of PeaceTech Incubators in a variety of geographic contexts that create pipelines from universities to PeaceTech entrepreneurship.

— Collaborate on the development of legible PeaceTech career pathways and accessible career pipelines between universities and civil society, private sector, and governmental organizations.

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