

Panel on “Positive Peace and Systems Thinking”

Stanford University, Positive Peace Conference, Monday, 5 October 2015

I would like to thank the co-organizers of this important meeting for their kind invitation. Since we each have only 8 minutes to make introductory comments, I would like to start by noting that I am wearing a double hat today: I am a scholar/practitioner at the Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego, and am representing the Shared Societies Project at the Club of Madrid as one of their Expert Advisors. I will start with a short description of the work of the Shared Societies Project since they have been working closely with the Institute for Economics and Peace and there is considerable overlap between their areas of interest. I will then provide an initial response to the questions posed for this panel--hoping that there will be time for follow up during the moderated discussion.

I should mention that I have followed the development of both the Global Peace Index and its Positive Peace Index closely and, in fact, I use both of them in my classes. They always provoke interesting discussions especially among American students who find the U.S. rankings puzzling.

For those of you who might not be familiar with it, the Club of Madrid/World Leadership Alliance is a group of former democratic Presidents and Prime Ministers from around the world. Their aim is use their experiences as leaders to partner with governments, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, scholars and the business world to build bridges between these actors and to encourage dialogue to foster social and political change.

The Club of Madrid initiated the Shared Societies Project in response to a call from world leaders for arguments and action plans to help them manage ethnic, cultural, religious and other identity differences. The project is now into its 9th phase. The project’s goals are:

- To promote project principles, tools and outreach to leaders
- To encourage greater leadership action to build share societies
- To advocate for the adoption of new language and instruments for social inclusion
- To include project principles and approaches in policy statements at the national and global levels.

Initially, the project focused mainly on intergroup/inter-ethnic relations. However, over time it was recognized that social cohesion is a multi-dimensional challenge. Putting my Shared Societies hat, I would summarize the project’s main findings as follows:

- The concept of shared societies is central to peace—and like positive peace, it rests on the interdependence between several key pillars: social, political, economic, environmental
- In order to promote Shared Societies, it is imperative to work simultaneously on all these pillars

- There is no single lever to kick-start systemic change; nonetheless, inclusion and participation are essential for arriving at decisions that reflect the needs and interests of diverse groups. Sustainable outcomes depend on social inclusion and participation based on a country's internal dynamics.
- Finally, leadership plays a critical role in facilitating the change process.

These findings align quite well with the eight pillars of Positive Peace and are also reflected in Article 16 of the newly-adopted Sustainable Development Goals.

However, the Shared Societies project is not a think tank. Going beyond identifying the main principles and good practices in social cohesion, the project has undertaken a sustained effort to share its findings with leaders and decision makers who can benefit from the good practices gathered from around the world. Its goal is to help translate these general findings into actionable guidance and advice in particular settings and contexts.

Which leads me to put my scholar/practitioner hat on to reflect on the challenges we face in applying general findings to promote positive social change in specific contexts.

It is true that our understanding of peacebuilding and social change has advanced significantly as a result of systems thinking and quantitative methods that allow us to make sense of vast amount of data. However, there are two main areas where we continue to struggle and these also apply to the Positive Peace Index.

The first is methodological. The Index adopts a systems approach to understanding positive peace. Yet, its definition of a system is confined primarily to a country's domestic system. Of the 8 pillars of positive peace only one refers to external factors, and it focuses on good relations with neighbors. Its three sub-indicators are hostility to foreigners, number of visitors, and regional integration. I am not sure how these were chosen, but they are clearly not sufficient. As we well know, international systemic factors are critical to both negative and positive peace. Colonialism, the Cold War, Globalization, and the Global War on Terror have all directly impacted the domestic prospects of many countries on the lowest ranks of the Positive Peace Index. It is not a coincidence that all these countries are former colonies with very short histories of statehood while the countries on the top of the Index are almost all European and Western countries. Thus, without accounting for international systemic factors that have allowed a certain group of countries to become more prosperous and more peaceful and yet using these countries' progress as the yardstick for positive peace raises methodological problems.

The second challenge is perhaps more serious, but it is not unrelated: Understanding the complex and non-linear interplay between multiple factors in any given model of change does not necessarily provide the key to how best to initiate and sustain social change. It is one thing to identify the strong correlations between various factors and quite another to design strategies that can help countries to find their own equilibrium between the different pillars upon which peace depends. Unfortunately, there is no road map to peace—only context-

specific and differentiated strategies whose outcome is far from certain. Based on extensive qualitative research and real life experiences, I would suggest that it is unlikely that the countries on the bottom of the Positive Peace Index would become more peaceful by following the path followed by those on the top of the Index. Instead, they need to find their own path to peace by drawing on their own societal assets and overcoming their weaknesses. Undoubtedly, their path to positive peace will require action on multiple pillars: social, political, economic, legal, technological, and environmental. But how these pillars will interact and what shape they will take will depend greatly on the internal dynamics of these societies as well as the international constraints/opportunities within which they operate. I very much look forward to the case studies on how the Positive Peace Index has been used in different country contexts and what type of response it has generated.

The Index and other similar studies are indispensable since they deepen our understanding of long term historical processes that have helped to anchor peace and emphasize the importance of long term investments necessary to promote peace rather than to end violence and war. Yet, they need to be complemented by empirically-based, context-specific country studies to enable us to understand alternative paths to positive peace which do not replicate the experiences of the European and Western countries and allow for differentiated strategies and outcomes for countries that are now at the bottom of the Index.