

# 'Connecting the Dots'

## Human Rights in Peacebuilding: Exploring Needs and Experiences of Policymakers and Practitioners

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*SHARINPEACE Report #2.2*

Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding  
(SHARINPEACE)



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'Connecting the Dots' – Human Rights in Peacebuilding  
Exploring Needs and Experiences of Policymakers and Practitioners  
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Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding (SHARINPEACE)  
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Human rights and peace as key elements of Europe's shared values and as cornerstones of our democratic constitutions are fundamentally challenged by today's multi-faceted crises. SHARINPEACE addresses these encounters and aims at qualifying the decision-makers of tomorrow in conceiving and practising human rights as intrinsic part of peacebuilding. SHARINPEACE offers an innovative approach to deal with the challenges of social, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe and beyond. Through SHARINPEACE, students and educators increase their awareness on how to include human rights in the training of conflict management. The core objective is the implementation of an EU-wide organised two-part module. Students will first gain central competences in the interrelated domains of human rights and peacebuilding and, in the second part, put their gained competences in a network-wide Crisis Intervention Simulation (CRIS) into (simulated) practice.

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## Executive Summary

*The Erasmus+ project “Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding (SHARINPEACE)” aims to address contemporary crises affecting human rights and peace, and to integrate human rights education into peacebuilding practices. The project highlights the importance of human rights as a fundamental element in building sustainable peace, and proposes an educational framework to instill these principles in future peace and policymakers. Through an interdisciplinary two-part university module, SHARINPEACE seeks to promote a deeper understanding of human rights as an integral part of peacebuilding and to encourage collaboration between educational and policy initiatives. The SHARINPEACE project outlines several objectives to achieve this educational integration. Key among these are embedding human rights in peacebuilding education, establishing a Crisis Intervention Simulation (CRIS) for hands-on learning, and engaging peace and policymakers in educational development.*

*This report discusses the nuances of a potential nexus between human rights and peacebuilding, and seeks to unravel how those at the forefront of policy and practice perceive and operationalise the link between these two fields. The report also identifies key skills needed to work in peace and human rights institutions and organisations. Based on insights gathered through expert interviews, the report highlights key issues such as the interconnectedness of human rights and peacebuilding, the importance of timing in intervening in conflicts, the potential for coordination between different actors, and the relationship between local and international actors. In addition, essential competencies for future practitioners emerged, such as an understanding of conflict dynamics, analytical skills and familiarity with humanitarian systems. In addition, the report presents real-life examples provided by experts that provide rich content for simulation games that can enhance students’ applied knowledge and critical thinking skills. We argue that by incorporating these insights and competencies into curriculum revision, educators can better prepare students to deal effectively with ethical dilemmas and operational challenges. As a result, this report contributes to efforts to create a more just and peaceful world by identifying successful strategies for further development in this area.*

# 1. Introduction

Human rights and peace as key elements of Europe's shared values and as cornerstones of our democratic constitutions are fundamentally challenged by today's multifaceted crises. The Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership project "Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding (SHARINPEACE)" addresses these challenges and aims at qualifying the decision-makers of tomorrow in conceiving and practising human rights as an intrinsic part of peacebuilding. Through SHARINPEACE, students and educators increase their awareness on how to include human rights in the training of conflict management. Organisations in the domain of peacebuilding are invited to become partners in this education process within SHARINPEACE.

We are convinced that this topic deserves greater attention. It is of significant value to understand human rights as an inclusive part of peacebuilding processes and that it is correspondingly relevant to introduce this into teaching and learning. Hence, the core objective of the project is the EU-wide introduction and implementation of an interdisciplinary two-part university module on human rights and peacebuilding.

We aim to achieve this through the following four sub-items:

- 1) Introducing human rights in peacebuilding education
- 2) Implementing a network-wide Crisis Intervention Simulation (CRIS)
- 3) Involving policy and peacemakers
- 4) Planning joint MA modules

In this module, the participating students will first gain central skills in the interrelated areas of human rights and peacebuilding and, in the second part, put their newly acquired expertise into (simulated) practice.

To facilitate this learning experience, the SHARINPEACE project envisages six Project Results (PR1-6) which are tangible results of individual Work Packages. The first Work Package dedicates itself to mapping the nexus of human rights education and peacebuilding. The results of PR1 form the basis for PR2, which explores needs and experiences by focusing on the stakeholder's perspectives; PR3 addresses the contents of the learning materials for teaching human rights in peacebuilding; technical tools for teaching and learning are subject of PR4; then, PR5 consists of the implementation of a pilot project of the module "Simulating Human

Rights in Peacebuilding". Finally, PR6 is a policy brief on how to teach and learn human rights in peacebuilding within the EU.

The interplay between human rights and peacebuilding constitutes a critical intersection in our understanding of principles of dignity, freedom and justice when seeking sustainable peace. Policymakers and practitioners navigate a complex landscape, by either safeguarding human rights or promoting peacebuilding initiatives. However, in many instances, the dynamic interaction between the two is overlooked, as certain governmental organisations, civil society groups and international bodies tend to concentrate excessively on either peacebuilding or human rights alone. At times, a tension can be perceived between the two concepts. On the one hand, peacebuilding is criticised for being a technical, top-down endeavour and human rights is from this perspective seen as more of a grassroots empowerment tool. On the other hand, human rights are criticised as a universalist concept that can be blind to diverse cultural and social contexts, and that peacebuilding on the contrary can be more versatile and context-sensitive. In either case, it is clear that in real-life situations, policy-makers and practitioners need to encompass both. This report delves into the nuances of a potential nexus between human rights and peacebuilding, seeking to unravel how those at the forefront of policy and practice perceive and operationalize the linkage between these two domains. How can we integrate human rights in the training of conflict management? What skills are needed to work in institutions and organisations concerned with peace and human rights?

It is essential to incorporate "real-life problems" into academic curricula to effectively raise the upcoming generation of scholars and practitioners. By connecting theoretical concepts with practical experiences, educational institutions can provide students with the skills needed to tackle ethical dilemmas and operational obstacles in the realms of human rights and peacebuilding. Therefore, this report investigates competences needed for the intricacies of real-world challenges, utilising input from both academic authorities and experienced practitioners.

This report engages with these questions through six expert interviews with policymakers and practitioners who work at various institutions and organisations involved with human rights and peacebuilding. These interviews offer invaluable insights into the challenges and op-

portunities inherent in the intersection of human rights and peacebuilding, providing a rich foundation for understanding the practical implications of the theoretical concepts discussed in academia. Thus, the report aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between human rights and peacebuilding, offering recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and educators alike. Finally, this report seeks to advance the collective effort toward a more just and peaceful world by highlighting successful strategies and identifying areas for further research and development.

## 2. Involving stakeholders from world of policy and practice

The SHARINPEACE project embraces a holistic approach to curriculum development as the second dimension of the project by actively involving policymakers and practitioners in designing our educational modules. We are interested in finding insights from policymakers and experts on how human rights are understood in relation to peacebuilding and what an academic course on the subject should look like so that the students - the policymakers and practitioners of tomorrow - are well prepared. The main question lies in defining the skills and knowledge learners should possess after completing the course. Thus, interaction with 'real-life experts' is crucial to determining desirable learning or training objectives upon course completion.

We seek to pinpoint how academic learning can result in applied knowledge. We recognize the invaluable expertise that policymakers and practitioners bring to the table. Their firsthand experience and understanding of the intricacies of human rights in the context of peacebuilding provide a rich source of knowledge that can inform and enhance the academic content. By integrating their insights into the curriculum design, we aim to create a learning experience that prepares students to be effective, adaptive, and informed professionals.

The first step in this process is the production of this report, in which key stakeholders and practitioners reflect on the role of human rights in peacebuilding from their unique perspective. They also discuss which competencies are required in order to practically use human rights in peacebuilding and, finally, they suggest a number of 'real-life' dilemmas that can be approached in the simulation part of the course.

The report will form an important backbone to the stakeholders workshop,<sup>1</sup> that is to be organised following the first pilot run of the module. We will invite a larger number of experts from policy and practice to an online workshop in order to get feedback on our experiences of teaching as well as deepen the themes discussed in the interviews and the first report. Students, educators, policy makers and practitioners will meet in the workshop.

The final step in this process will be the writing of a policy brief, based upon all these steps that will spell out and summarise the didactics of interacting between teachers, students and policymakers and practitioners. This document will guide future course iterations and other institutions seeking to adopt a similar approach.

Our vision extends beyond the project's lifespan, aiming to establish the stakeholders workshop as a regular feature of the "Human Rights & Peacebuilding" module. By maintaining an ongoing dialogue with experts in the field, we can continually adapt and update the curriculum to reflect the evolving landscape of human rights and peacebuilding. This helps us to ensure the quality of the module.

We thus see the role of policymakers and practitioners as key to the success of the project and the final course. Their knowledge supports the development of the learning outcomes, and their feedback during the implementation of the project helps to continuously adapt the module. Their involvement enables us to tackle societal challenges through the development of learning outcomes that are tailor-made to meet the relevant learning needs, reduce skill mismatches, and support skill enhancement and professionalism to work on an international level.

### 3. Methodology – selection of respondents and methods of analysis

Individual expert interviews were chosen as the mode of information collection. This particular type of method is used in order to collect data and tap into a specific field. It is a qualitative interview that follows a

<sup>1</sup> The SHARINPEACE Multiplier Event E1 "Human Rights and Peacebuilding: Connecting the Dots" took place online on 12.04.2024.



guide, designed in order to extract the knowledge held by the expert (Meuser and Nagel 2009).<sup>2</sup>

As this first round was of an explorative kind, it was important to let the participants have the time to properly lay out their experiences and points of departure which would be hard to find the time for in a shared discussion. Importantly, in terms of being frank and being able to take a critical view on one's own organisation and work, a one-to-one interview was chosen as the best option, rather than a focus group.

The selection of participants in the interview study for the individual interviews was aimed to achieve a variety of voices and expertise from both institutions and civil society. In particular "process knowledge" was sought, that is, "knowledge that is based on practical experience and the institutional context of actions" (Döringer 2020). Such knowledge is linked to the role and position of the respondent, and "comprises knowledge about interactions, routines, or social practices" (Ibid).

In order to ensure candid conversations, the respondents were granted anonymity, although the organisations involved will be named. They are as follows

1. Berghof Foundation, a foundation dedicated to research and support people and processes that seek to transform violent and destructive conflicts into nonviolent social and political exchange;
2. Frontline Defenders, an international human rights organisation with the specific aim of protecting human rights defenders at risk;
3. Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, one of the world's leading feminist women's rights organisations, working directly in areas affected by war and conflict with more than 100 partner organisations in 20 countries;
4. The European Commission, specifically Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), focusing on Humanitarian support;
5. The European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU's diplomatic service which carries out the EU's foreign and security policy,

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Niklas Alexandersson, Södertörn University, for excellent assistance. The quotes have been lightly edited for clarity.

specifically on Conflict Prevention and Mediation Support and Integrated Approach for Security and Peace Directorate;

6. The European Peace Liaison Organisation (EPLO), the independent civil society platform of European NGOs, networks of NGOs and think tanks that are committed to peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict.

The interviews were held on Zoom, recorded, and then transcribed. Each respondent was interviewed for between 25 and 50 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured. Initially, the respondents were briefed on the SHARINPEACE project aims, and the three main themes of interest were outlined. During the interviews, respondents were free to elaborate on themes of particular interest. These were the prods provided to the respondents ahead of the interview:

- The first area of interest concerns how you understand and work with the connection between human rights and peacebuilding.
- The second area of interest concerns what needs your organisation has, and what you are looking for in the future generation of employees.
- The third area of interest is whether you think the planned module is a good match for your needs, and if not, why.

Once the material had been transcribed, a content analysis was conducted on the interviews in order to categorise the information. The content of the interviews was coded and sorted under the broad predetermined themes as well as under sub-themes that emerged during the interviews.

The respondents' answers are presented in what follows. The first section comprises respondents' thoughts on connections between human rights and peacebuilding, with the sub-themes of general connection, timing, the need for coordination, and universalism vs. people's power. Section three looks into the respondents' needs regarding their own organisation and what they are looking for in the future generation of employees. The third section concerns what the module can work on in terms of dilemmas that would be interesting for their own particular organisation.

## 4. Connection between human rights and peacebuilding

The first area of interest concerns how the respondents understand and work with the connection between human rights and peacebuilding.

### 4.1 General connection: “Human rights defenders are building blocks for peace.”

The connection between human rights and peacebuilding is a core theme in SHARINPEACE. The most central theme in the interviews was an understanding of the themes as deeply enmeshed which was stressed by all respondents.

Respondent 1, working at an organisation that connects policymakers, practitioners and media, takes a bird’s eye view and pinpoints the complimentary value of learning from each other:

*Peacebuilding and human rights can be really complementary - if the practitioners that are coming from both fields are well aware of each other and what each other's agendas are. One of the main arguments is that a conflict resolution or peace building repertoire can teach human rights advocates a lot about process and how to bring people together and how to dialogue around important issues. Whereas the human rights field really adds some moral compass and guidance and can also really help link the root causes of conflict or the needs of people in conflict to a framework that is quite universally known and acknowledged (Respondent 1).*

Likewise, Respondent 2, working at a civil society organisation that partners with women’s organisations in conflict-affected societies, highlights the tension between activism and peacebuilding, especially from the point of view of local organisations. The expert approached the subject from an activist point of view, pointing out that the term ‘peacebuilder’ is not readily embraced by local organisations, who see themselves as more anchored in the human rights tradition. While certain entities see activism and peacebuilding as conflicting endeavours, Respondent 2 contends that they can coexist harmoniously:

*I don't see it as a contradiction because then you take away some of the local ownership of the peacebuilding aspect if you don't also have this rights perspective. However, one can understand that when you get into, say, Track One peace negotiations, it takes on a different dynamic. Then it becomes*

*politics and other discussions about accountability, and maybe human rights may not have the right focus as it enters some kind of negotiation. My spontaneous thought is that both aspects are important. However, it's clear that those involved in local engagement don't see themselves as peacebuilders. They don't label themselves that way, and perhaps that has to do with seeing themselves more as part of civil society (Respondent 2).*

Another perspective emerges regarding the role of human rights in such endeavours. Respondent 5 emphasises that human rights should be seen as a tool rather than an end goal, with the primary focus being on placing individuals and communities at the forefront of peacebuilding efforts:

*If we talk about [the] UN, resources are limited, and states sometimes ratify conventions and not necessarily (follow through). If you have human rights as a vehicle for your peace building activities or your prevention activities, it means that you will start by that and you will take into account the people, individuals, and communities because they are the ones affected by conflict. And then they are the ones, actually, that come up with the solutions as well, usually because they are the first ones that have to deal with the challenges (Respondent 5).*

The question is whether you can have one without the other? One respondent elaborated the relationship in the following way:

*It is possible to work towards peace without working towards human rights, but that would be negative peace (simply the perceived absence of violence). If there are still human rights violations, there is still violence against people. So if we want positive peace, we must work towards human rights as well. So on the contrary my conception of true peacebuilding (in the way that the civil society peacebuilding community understands it) is that it must align itself with human rights objectives so that peace efforts can be more lasting and sustainable, and create societies where everyone can thrive (Respondent 3).*

The struggle for human rights often takes place in societies that by many are considered to be at peace. Yet, many people suffer insecurities and conflict: "Women human rights defenders are fighting... conflict patriarchy as a conflict against them. Whether or not the place is recognized as an armed conflict or not" (Respondent 3). Likewise, another respondent pointed out that there are situations where human rights may not take

centre stage. Still, they become an integral part, and a possible opening, for addressing conflict over, for example, resources:

*I think this is often the case with possible tensions between refugee communities and host communities, or between farmers and herders and how to avoid conflict around that. So it's not strictly through the lens of human rights, but issues relating to human rights enter into play and our part of the picture when trying to address some of those issues. So, I mean, you know I mentioned inclusion earlier but particular considerations being paid to the human rights of diverse women and diverse young people. Rights also relating to issues like climate change, when it comes to access to natural resources, the environment etc. A lot of our members engage in work that relates to working with communities and ensuring that there are dialogue and mediation channels between communities to avoid conflict (Respondent 6).*

Expert knowledge shows that integrating human rights considerations into peacebuilding efforts is essential, particularly in addressing tensions between communities and ensuring inclusive dialogue.

#### **4.2 Timing – “One thing after the other is outdated.”**

There were some interesting insights into the question about timing when it comes to “what to do when,” where human rights are often seen to come at a later stage, added as an afterthought, when more important things have been dealt with at for example the negotiation table:

*Sometimes it is portrayed as an uneasy relationship where the mediator says, could you please go away with all of your human rights stuff? We need to take care of the important business of peacemaking first, and then we can maybe think about that somewhere further down the line. Human rights are often sort of being seen as pushing for what is right, but not being very either diplomatic or pragmatic. However, this can be a misperception. In many mediation processes, a reference to human rights has actually made the agreements more substantive and also more sustainable (Respondent 1).*

Similarly, another respondent recognizes arguments against prioritising human rights—such as concerns over timing or counterproductivity—nevertheless still advocated for their inclusion:

*I always try to see how we can indeed still integrate it, because I do think, and studies show that if we want sustainable peace agreements (this is*

*needed). Also, in our implementation of peace agreements (to make sure that it trickles down (Respondent 5).*

The idea that you have “one thing after the other” is seen as outdated as the contemporary world is more complex and multilayered. This is not how international organisations work in conflict-affected societies, one respondent argued with experience from humanitarian work:

*We see that the era where you had humanitarian aid and then that ended and then you had the development phase and the peacebuilding is over, there is now a lot of overlap. The crises are very complex in terms of the number of actors [and] the number of interests that you have to take into consideration, so in that sense I do think that it could be useful for [the] future (Respondent 4).*

### 4.3 The need for coordination

According to one respondent who works at the EEAS with conflict analysis and options and recommendations for the EU to prevent conflict, there is a great need to further integrate the human rights and peacebuilding perspective in the area of civil and military coordination:

*Especially in armed conflicts where we see that there is a multiplication of factors and it's a complex crisis setting. We see that coordination between civilian and military resources is really important. We strongly integrate human rights into the recommendations (for the EU). So that means connecting the dots. We look at development, we look at human rights, we look also at the economy, security and defence capacity building. So it's a very, very comprehensive approach. And even, as I say, even in the security type of options, we always emphasise, having indeed this human rights-based approach, for example, lack of trust by the communities towards the authorities and the security actors (Respondent 5).*

From a more humanitarian perspective, DG ECHO works to support humanitarian assistance, often in crisis- and natural disaster-affected areas, to meet basic needs and indirectly support the fulfilment of human rights, such as the right to life and economic and social rights. Here, the connection to a human rights agenda is not as direct, yet it is not considered a separate field of action. As the respondent underlines, humanitarian aid plays a crucial role within the human rights ecosystem. Regarding peacebuilding, the respondent notes that their mandate does

not directly involve promoting peace or long-term solutions post-conflict. However, they highlight their involvement in activities that contribute to peacebuilding, particularly through advocating for international humanitarian law (IHL):

*So, there are a couple of activity areas where we are contributing in some ways to peace building. One area is international humanitarian law (which is) a long-standing priority. We do that on one hand because it protects civilians in the immediate phase of conflict, but also because we see that promoting international humanitarian law is a kind of precondition for the prospect of peace in the societies that were affected by conflict. So as such ECHO has been a long-standing advocate of international humanitarian law. We do that through public communications, we organise a lot of events for the UN and others, we are trying to be the voice of international humanitarian law also within the EU institutions. So, we really see that international humanitarian law is one of those elements which needs to be promoted to foster peace building (Respondent 4).*

Interestingly, the respondent emphasises a conflict-sensitive approach to humanitarian aid and the importance of ensuring that their assistance does not exacerbate conflicts or create new inequalities:

*For example, we are providing assistance to a community that has been displaced by fighting but they end up in a place where there is a host community which has its own needs, connected to water and drought for example. One way to make sure that we remain sensitive and do not create harm is that also the host community has at least some sort of assistance, so that there is no new tension or conflict between those displaced and the host community (Respondent 4).*

The respondent also notes the changing humanitarian landscape, marked by long-term, protracted crises rooted in conflict and climate crisis. They advocate for a collaborative, holistic strategy in managing crises and fostering peace, implying the need for a collective and integrated approach to crisis management and peacebuilding.

Finally, the respondent from EPLO also gave several interesting and varied examples of how their member organisations address human rights as part of their peacebuilding tasks, demonstrating the multilayered and integrated connection between the two. In this regard, they focus on several key areas. Firstly, they address government accountability, particularly concerning abuses by national security forces, by

working with partners to prevent such violations and advocate for justice. This includes training security forces on human rights law. Secondly, they support the justice system to ensure human rights are upheld, including past abuses and individuals' rights to defend themselves. They also train communities in human rights law for self-protection and advocacy.

Additionally, they engage in transitional justice efforts to address human rights abuses during conflicts, working with communities, government actors, and local authorities. Furthermore, they collaborate with the EU to ensure their actions in conflict-affected countries are conflict-sensitive and respect human rights, advocating for robust conflict analysis. Lastly, their work on inclusion intersects with human rights considerations, addressing discriminatory practices and ensuring equal access to public services and decision-making processes for all members of society. (Respondent 6)

#### 4.4 Human rights – Top-down universalism or people's power?

Increasingly criticism has been voiced against the human rights doctrine as a top-down discourse, resting on a potentially oppressive universalism. Some of this criticism from the literature was voiced in the first SHARINPEACE report. However, this view was not prevalent among the experts interviewed in this report, who rather defended and promoted the human rights agenda as an instrument for popular protest and a 'weapon of the weak':

*I can hear it quite a lot in academia that human rights is too much of a universal kind of discourse that is not paying enough attention to local dynamics and so on, and that it's the outsiders kind of bringing to the table that kind of thing and that social rights are, are sort of sidelined a little bit. Further, a recourse to human rights is made if it's in the interest of certain actors, but not if it's in the interest of others. And that basically (human rights discourse) needs to be? Unravelling or really sort of, um, decolonised or, or democratised. We do get all of that criticism, and I think on a case-by-case basis that may be also sometimes justified. But my assessment would be that it's more often the application than the substance of the rights that is the problem (Respondent 1).*

Another respondent highlighted the critical role of protecting human rights defenders for the continuation of human rights advocacy. They



pointed out that individuals, such as leaders of human rights organisations, lawyers, journalists, community and union leaders, often face reprisals in their efforts to advocate for human rights.

*They can come both from the authorities or from the community, these reprisals. Some of them experience physical and mental threats when they're being threatened with reprisals for their work. They can be arrested, detained, criminalised and judicially harassed over short periods or over the course of many years ... So, there's kind of a whole range of things that people experience that are meant to really intimidate them and reduce their human rights work, and in the most extreme cases many killings unfortunately. Whether in the context of a broader movement or targeted killings of human rights defenders by different actors. I really see these reprisals as detrimental to the whole human rights movement because if you don't have individuals who fight for human rights, then you don't have a human rights movement ... If there are not any people in those countries doing that work at the local level and defending the rights of their own community, and if those people are not able to do their work then there's little to sustain the whole movement entirely (Respondent 3).*

#### 4.5. Local-external tensions

The respondents' experiences varied regarding the relationship between local communities and international intervention, depending on their positionality and the mandate of the organisation or institution they work for. For example, the representative for ECHO at the European Commission explained that their organisation's funding approach for humanitarian aid involves supporting intermediary organisations that collaborate with local communities.

*In terms of funding, we still go through these partner organisations, but we very strongly encourage them afterwards to work with local organisations. We see links to what we do and peacebuilding and that is in the area of civil and military coordination. Especially in armed conflicts where we see that there is a multiplication of factors and it's a complex crisis setting. We see that coordination between civilian and military resources is really important. So in the area of humanitarian aid, the leading role on this so-called civil military coordination is belonging to OCHA (the UN agency responsible for humanitarian coordination). We are really strongly supporting this mandate (Respondent 4).*

The respondent also highlighted another intersection where their work aligns with human rights through gender and age analyses to raise support for the needs of women, men, boys, and girls, as well as the prioritisation of considerations for older individuals, disabilities, and inclusion to ensure aid is inclusive and non-discriminatory:

*There is also the general principle that aid should not be done in a discriminatory manner and it should not lead to discrimination or create new inequalities. I would say this is our general connection to human rights, especially in the field of humanitarian protection where we are trying to work on protecting people from violence and safeguarding their rights. There is for example from gender-based violence the specific challenges of children that are caught up in conflict (Respondent 4).*

From an activist point of view, Respondent 2 argued that human rights offer a solid foundation for advocacy, especially when leveraging international instruments:

*There are certain issues that are more directed at women's rights because they may be affected in a different way in a conflict. So that it is probably important to keep track of both parts, so to speak. If we look at how women in particular are affected by land and land rights in a conflict where the man disappears... Then human rights are something stable to hold on to, it is an instrument that you can use. Now, not everyone knows about them or feels comfortable using them, but I think it's easier to conduct advocacy work when you can lean on international instruments that are in place. Because if these rights are not met, it will not be a peaceful peace (Respondent 2).*

Similarly, another respondent also highlighted the importance of humanising big concepts to foster a deeper connection with local problems and discover more effective problem-solving mechanisms:

*A lot of things that we talk about in Brussels are big concepts and huge places - we'll talk about for example (ideas such as) the right to assembly, in an entire country -and sometimes those issues seem a bit overwhelming and huge. Then it's easier to desensitise yourself but when you bring it back to the experience of an individual in the form of a human rights defender, then policymakers are much more likely to connect, I think. And try to find real solutions when we're talking about individuals or small communities or groups. So, I think that's an important dimension as well is that it helps people cognitively make sense of issues for themselves and in their work (Respondent 3).*

Respondent 6 argued that engaging with local leaders, often older men in positions of power, for conflict prevention and human rights protection can prioritise issues relevant to men, overlooking women and youths' needs:

*For example, when it comes to securing routes to access water, it's traditionally the women who are in charge in a given community of providing the family with water. They may be more exposed than other members of the community by having to travel a long distance or take certain routes that bring them to the water points. That's just one example. But if you work with local leaders who are less familiar with the particular struggles and the threats to the human rights of members of the community that are not men and or people in positions of power, they may be less able to address those as part of dialogue and mediation efforts (Respondent 6).*

Working around or alongside local leaders without causing tension or unsustainable outcomes poses challenges. Understanding local perceptions of rights and needs is crucial, even when these do not align with international norms or the majority's views, to ensure inclusive, sustainable peace and respect for all community members' rights. Different societal groups and communities may have varying views, highlighting the importance of context-specific, sensitive approaches in conflict analysis and resolution:

*It's extremely important to gain an understanding of how local populations, groups and individuals perceive their rights, needs, priorities, what grievances they may have. Because this also gives an idea of what rights they think may be not respected by government forces, national security forces, etcetera ... This does not mean that people living in fragile and conflict-affected countries don't necessarily have a perception of their rights that's in line with some of the positions defended by international actors. Let's say defending the rights of homosexual people in a given country may not receive a lot of support from other society groups at a given point. Even if they're in a sort of minority position within society and within the population, that doesn't mean that we should be ignoring their concerns for the safety of homosexuals in the country. Even if there is no legal framework protecting them in the country, if there are legal frameworks putting them in danger because of their homosexuality. I think it's important to perceive that they remain a group that should be helped even though they are not representing the majority view in the country (Respondent 6).*

The respondent concludes that navigating civil society can also be challenging as it comprises diverse viewpoints, especially in regions with

ethnic tensions. Balancing the resolution of long-standing conflicts while safeguarding community rights poses challenges. Brokering peace may clash with ensuring security and human rights for all, creating tensions, particularly during transitional periods. Sensitivity and context-specific approaches are crucial to address these dynamics, necessitating engagement with various population groups to avoid generalisations and understand differing perspectives within communities.

Context-specific line of reasoning was taken as a strong argument in favour of using human rights as an advocacy platform, and for example Respondent 2 argued that one has to be aware that the criticism against human rights can be used in order to create a backlash and maintain power:

*You can certainly have different opinions here, but I think that argument is used because you don't want a change in a society, for example. That is, quite often people in positions of power who can use it as an argument to maintain a patriarchal structure, for example. Religious communities or whatever it may be ... that makes you not want to use it because it will upset a balance of power in society (Respondent 2).*

Several of the respondents kept coming back to gender as a key topic and stressed the importance of understanding how gender equality and women's rights fit into the framework of human rights in peacebuilding:

*We are constantly coming back to the topics around the importance of supporting human rights defenders. Especially women defenders, especially in the context of women, peace and security and making sure they were safe and able to do their work at a local level.*

*There's a growing awareness in general, but what do you do with that in practice remains a big challenge. There's certain steps that are taken towards pursuing gender equality and lessening gender violence and all those things, but we're taking the intermediary steps and treating them as an end in themselves rather than taking it a step further. So, for example: in transition periods we're trying to get a certain number of women in parliaments around the world. But whether that translates into more gender equality for women in the country... I see that we're really prioritising getting to a certain number because that's the metric we're able to measure. I think a big challenge is how do we translate policy priorities into real impact. And how do we measure that impact in a better way? Because right now it's really hard to say, what measures triggered what changes and whether the changes are sustainable or not and. I think we need to keep prioritising gender equality even when we're looking at conflict context and crisis context, because a lot of times women's rights for example, just gets deprioritized (Respondent 1).*

As a result, the respondent highlighted that gender equality tends to be deprioritised in conflict and crisis contexts despite its crucial role in sustainable peace and security: "It's not that people say it's not important (they would never say it out loud), but in practice, it's not what they're looking at." Hence, there is a need for greater emphasis on ensuring that those in positions of power prioritise gender equality, human rights, and peacebuilding.

## 5. Competencies needed – understanding complexity

The second area of interest concerns the needs the organisations have in terms of competencies, and what they are looking for in the future generation of employees. As presented below, key themes include navigating conflict-affected contexts, gaining analytical and advocacy-related capabilities, system comprehension, and learning real-life dilemmas.

### 5.1 Working in conflict-affected contexts: Connecting the dots

One respondent highlighted that the emphasis in education should be on building trust among various actors, acknowledging the need for collaboration across security, defence, and human rights sectors. In this sense, the respondent described a successful program as practice and solution-oriented, grounded in real-life events, and strategically engaged with stakeholders and communities to be seen as a problem solver.

*What I see of value is indeed have people that can connect the dots ... we need people that can integrate a people centered approach to security and defence ... I have a human rights background. I am not a security defence expert, but I have worked a lot in the field, but also at international level, with security people, with militaries. And I think that's key. You have to, not shy away. You have to understand their perceptions, what they value, how they work, even formalities, like how do you pass on messages, how do you convince (and argue your point) internally (Respondent 5).*

The respondent also highlighted the critical need to blend multiple strategies into practice, including mediation, dialogue, advocacy, conflict

prevention, and a human rights-based approach, by leveraging international and UN human rights mechanisms to navigate complex situations that may intensify tensions:

*Again, with a very cautious, conflict sensitivity approach. How can this indeed be better used in the international fora in Geneva, in New York, we [are] also more and more now integrating an atrocity prevention lens into our conflict analysis. So again, I think there are some options and tools that are barely thought of actually in those exercises. So, I'm trying to build also that capacity or awareness about using, for example, the human rights tools. And then it's more about integrating, as I mentioned, the human rights-based approach ... Yeah, the people in operational (positions) don't think enough of the theory of what is there, what has worked well, what we have as, as evidence based, based on academia and other research. But at the same time, also in academia, we often tend to forget how to make (this knowledge) practical (Respondent 5).*

Another respondent with experience in staff recruitment also underlined the need for individuals who can navigate complex contexts with diverse actors:

*There is the textbook reply and then you have to really adapt it to real life scenarios, and real life is always more complex than that. Very often it's skills that we are looking for that can be adapted to a variety of roles. ... Especially working in a public administration, we are not necessarily specialists. We can move to various departments, but what is important is that we have skills in terms of analysis, being able to convey messages in an efficient manner that we're looking for (Respondent 4).*

## 5.2 Analytical skills

Another point emphasised in the interviews was analytical skills. Respondents shared that they seek individuals skilled in analysis, particularly in evaluating policy documents, reports from peacebuilding organisations, and political developments, to inform advocacy efforts. One respondent more specifically described the EU or context-dependent knowledge as valuable:

*Even though we don't carry out any programming work, it's often a useful skill to our area of expertise to be familiar with EU programming processes, since that's a very important concern for a lot of our member organisations ... An understanding of the complexities of conflict. Several of my colleagues have worked for organisations implementing projects in fragile and conflict*

*affected countries, and gaining an understanding of how complex conflict situations are, the variety of interests at stake, the diversity of the stakeholder landscape. When you have first-hand experience with that it's extremely valuable but it's also something that can be taught and learned (at least indirectly) to avoid having the sort of monolithic views that I was referring to when it comes to youth, women, communities, society, etc. If you look at the reports we produce there's always a component around the importance of context-specific approaches and engagement, because local realities vary from one village to another, one city to another (Respondent 6).*

### 5.3 The need for advocacy, the need to understand the system

One of the respondents, an advocacy officer at Frontline Defenders, began their career with a focus on peacebuilding and was drawn to human rights advocacy, particularly due to the connections with peacebuilding, differing from colleagues with backgrounds in human rights law or practice. They explained their work in protecting human rights defenders:

*So, there's a whole range of things; there are grants (those are protection grants, meaning to support physical security or mental health or whatever); there are digital protection consultations; there are physical protection consultations, there is rest and respite while being supported. Advocacy is one of the things (we work with), and that's what we do here in Brussels. (Respondent 3).*

The same respondent also emphasised the importance of understanding the intricacies of the human rights advocacy system, which encompasses a broad network of international organisations to navigate and leverage diverse platforms and mechanisms available for advocating human rights effectively:

*The two big actors that we do the most advocacy to are the EU and the UN. Their presence everywhere in the world make them a natural partner to interact with. We can advocate on different levels, whether it's at the political level or at the working level. And there are different purposes to different levels of advocacy. There are other major actors to the UN, for example UN Human Rights Council but also to the UN Special Rapporteurs, there is a UN Special Rapporteur on Human rights defenders who does all sorts of advocacy on behalf of defenders and raising attention to the issues and developing the knowledge base. We try to influence that and contribute to that and to trigger her support in different cases. But we also interact with other UN Special Rapporteurs, like the rapporteur on freedom of assembly, the rapporteur on judges and lawyers, and on freedom of expression. In terms of*

*other actors, we're still developing that. The OSCE is another actor that we think could be more active in the region and in support of defenders, so we're currently working on developing that, also the Inter American Commission, the African Union and so forth (Respondent 3).*

Another respondent also highlighted the importance of having familiarity with a given context and EU's institutional framework and understanding how it connects to the issues at hand:

*The landscape can sometimes be a bit difficult to navigate if you haven't worked in the EU institutions or worked on the institutions. Because of the need to address some of the connections that I mentioned it's also important to understand some of the EU structures and how they relate to those different connections (Respondent 6).*

One respondent from a women's rights organisation described a prevalent misconception in the recruitment process as the assumption that expertise in the subject matter qualifies one for any position. They contended that this approach could lead to mismatches in hiring, as it sets unrealistic expectations for the role that do not align with its actual demands. They also highlighted the importance of merging a mix of skills and levels of knowledge, including those not fully versed in one perspective:

*Because of our mandate, we of course receive applications all the time from women who have either human rights or women's rights, and are very strongly grounded in that. And that's important, of course. But sometimes you also need to have these other aspects that are not so connected to that. If you want to be a grant manager, it might not be activism or the great ideas about peacebuilding that are relevant. So I also think that we as an organisation need to have both other professional qualities. But when we look at our program offices, they become stronger in the offices where they have experts who sit and work with the programs who have experience perhaps or studied peacebuilding or women's rights. ... But if we were 150 gender experts, I don't think we would be a good organisation (Respondent 2).*

Respondent 2 also added that activism can offer valuable experience and skills, such as engagement, organisation, and advocacy, even though it is not mandatory. On the organisational level, maintaining competence in making an impact and engaging with large international organisations is crucial for staying relevant and heard in human rights activism. The respondent elucidates how other issues beyond activism



and advocacy can also be relevant even though expertise in women's issues, peace, and security remains vital. For example, the necessity of compliance with contracts, financial management, and anti-corruption measures are also becoming increasingly important as the organisation faces demands for rigorous checks in funding processes.

Observing a significant gap in the understanding of human rights and peacebuilding among those working on security issues within the EU, Respondent 3 mentioned a gap between real-world experience and theoretical knowledge to fill in career-oriented education:

*You've got people who study human rights and peace building who go into certain types of jobs, and then you have the people who hold the real reins of conflict and security management. Like the people managing security sector support for example, or strategy development around the common security and defence policy mission, CSDP. Those people do not necessarily have a human rights and peace building background. So how do we bridge that gap? I think that's an important one and making sure that people who hold kind of the real reins of decision making on those situations are more amenable to receive input from human rights organisations and peace building organisations (Respondent 3).*

## 6. Real-life dilemmas: learning for life

The last theme that emerged in the interviews were a number of examples of real-life dilemmas that the respondents, from their work experience, suggested as particularly interesting to be part of a simulation game in order to develop students' applied knowledge and ability to think critically about situations that have moral, political and social dimensions.

### 6.1 Child Soldiers

One particularly compelling example drawn from the interviews highlights the complex interplay of moral, political, and social considerations regarding child soldiers. One of the respondents talked about the dilemma of child soldiers, presenting a multifaceted issue at the intersection of human rights and peacebuilding:

*if you have to develop legislation on victim reparation, but also justice, or if a new UN mission is set up after a peace agreement or the UN is already working on this on the ground, it has to always now look at the human*

*rights-based approach. But at the same time, your human rights-based approach tells you, okay, those are actually also victims. And that's what the international standards say. But at the same time, you are faced with people on the ground that have had, for example, their daughters raped by those child soldiers. So what about their rights? (Respondent 5)*

## 6.2 Elections

Another real-life example raised by several respondents to be used in the simulation game concerned the local elections. Respondents touched upon the role of different actors and potential collaborative strategies for preventing electoral violence through dialogue and setting of ethical standards:

*Someone is the electoral commission, someone is the main party in power. The other one is the opposition. You have one representing civil society and then the international NGO, for example. And they have to all sit and discuss about how to prevent electoral violence and potentially indeed using dialogue. So, would we come up with some standards, ethical standards? What are the interests at stake? Of course, the party in power and the opposition will have very different ideas (Respondent 5).*

Another respondent highlighted the dilemma of trade-offs in organisational decision-making:

*I believe there are definitely distinct accountability lines, and how they may differ between what is stated publicly and what is perhaps rewarded or pushed behind the scenes could be an interesting dynamic. I think many organisations can relate to this. On one hand, there are valiant goals and ambitious project descriptions. On the other hand, there are administration or donor regulations that dictate specific deadlines and programming that cannot be adjusted. ... Everyone emphasises that it is crucial to uphold a human rights agenda. However, what happens when it becomes inconvenient? What if it requires actions (by you) that are perceived as risking a project or alienating an important partner? How does the organisation support you in such situations? (Respondent 1)*

## 6.3 Forgotten human rights defenders

One of the respondents highlighted the examples where one can observe a discrepancy between international perceptions and the reality on the ground:

*I can use very specifically the case of Iran. We had a crisis erupting in September 2022, which obviously had been brewing for a long time. And the crisis has had ups and downs in the last six months. Iranians still feel like it's ongoing, but at the international level the pressure is dying, and we have international actors acting as if the crisis is over. Therefore we've reached a relative semblance of peace, if we're looking at the degree of interaction of the international community regarding Iran. But de facto there are still tens of very prominent human rights defenders in prison in Iran and they're essentially being forgotten. They were basically just picked up from the very start of the crisis in September and now there's no view to them being released, but we're acting as if the crisis has moved on and we're in relative peace at the moment. I think this could be an interesting dilemma between negative peace and positive peace. Let's say hundreds of human rights defenders remain in prison and in hiding because of concerns for their safety, and are therefore not able to do their work. I would be curious to see how students try to tackle that challenge (Respondent 3).*

## 6.5 Neutrality vs speaking out

Another respondent discussed the context-related challenges faced by humanitarian aid organisations as a potentially suitable topic for simulation games. The respondent reflected on unique conditions within a conflict zone may clash with the values upheld by these organisations, typically grounded in principles such as humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and non-discrimination:

*Usually, humanitarian aid operates on the basis of the four principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and non-discrimination. Neutrality in particular, is very important. For humanitarian organisations to be able to say "we are here and we don't have a stake in the conflict, we are not taking sides. We are here only to assist those in need." However, in Somalia all humanitarians have to have a military escort or security services. Of course, on the one hand it's for their safety, but then it makes them be seen by the local community as associated with one side (Respondent 4).*

In another scenario, humanitarian organisations face a challenging decision between their value-driven obligations to report observed violations, like the denial of humanitarian access or intentional targeting of civilians, and the potential repercussions of losing their operational licence and access to critical areas, versus the option to stay silent in order to maintain their ability to work. The respondent exemplified this challenge by reflecting on Ukraine:

*Ukraine, of course, is a very complicated place. There is the question of where assistance should be provided - based on the humanitarian principles it should be possible also in the occupied territories. The public opinion in Ukraine has been questioning this principle of neutrality. For example, ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) has the explicit right to operate on both sides of the frontline under international humanitarian law. ICRC has been attacked very vocally for that and they had to defend the right and the obligation to operate on both sides of the conflict. I think the dilemmas are usually linked to the fact that there are restrictions by the authorities that govern the territory - which can be the state but it can also be an armed actor. They can impose restrictions on where they can give assistance or who to give assistance. Sometimes the authorities want to screen the beneficiary lists and impose who should be the beneficiaries. Of course, that might not necessarily be the ones that need the assistance the most. The dilemma is "do humanitarian actors stay and deliver or do they withdraw"? It's this kind of question of doing no harm but still assisting people. I think these kinds of dilemmas are unfortunately quite common (Respondent 4).*

*Respondent 4 also shared a similar example from the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, where authorities have significantly limited or entirely blocked humanitarian access to the region for extended periods. Organisations that publicly criticised these restrictions faced even tighter constraints on their operations. Navigating such restrictions poses a substantial challenge in the era of digital technologies. The respondent underlined that where misinformation and disinformation are rampant, humanitarian actors run a greater risk of being perceived as partisan or being falsely represented as taking sides. This development has made their work increasingly perilous and challenging across various locations.*

## 6.5 Cultural heritage as a site of conflict

One simulation game scenario suggested by a respondent involved the potential significance of cultural heritage, particularly the violent destruction of cultural symbols. According to the respondent, this scenario especially becomes more critical when coupled with increasingly radical narratives that depict the opposing community as an existential threat, as illuminated in the case of Cyprus:

*I don't know to what extent it's easy to go from the northern part to the other part of Cyprus, but acts of violence committed during the night against statues, emblems that one part of Cyprus would wish to destroy on the other side, perhaps? That's one idea ... Going back to cultural heritage...this would perhaps be an early warning sign than violence per se, but seeing narratives around the members of the other population being extremely negative, with regards to how they deal with the past of the island and the division. Seeing that narratives are getting more radical and increasingly painting the other*

*as an existential threat to the other side, something like that. There could be elements relating to the roles of foreign actors. For example: tensions linked to the type of support being provided by Turkey (to the northern part), the provision of lethal equipment, efforts to de-escalate and to stop lethal equipment from being provided (Respondent 6).*

## 6.6 Property, access to land and water

Another example from Cyprus addresses concerns about the treatment and protection of rights for one community in Cyprus by the other, questioning the extent of interaction and movement between the two parts. One respondent reflected on the topic:

*Issues relating to how the rights (again, I don't know to what extent there is a lot of circulation between the two parts) of one part of the population of Cyprus is being addressed or protected in the other part. Perhaps some laws being passed that restrict the movement of groups or members of the other population group, or prevent them from purchasing property, or seizing some of their assets unilaterally without having any recourse. If there are any shared water resources, attempts at preventing members from the other part of the population to access those resources (Respondent 6).*

## 6.7 Humanitarian operations and civil society

One of the respondents highlighted a critical concern regarding the challenge civil society organisations face in being recognised as legitimate humanitarian actors especially within the framework for supporting refugees and internally displaced persons. Despite actively engaging in humanitarian work, these organisations often find themselves marginalised and not classified as humanitarian actors, consequently being excluded from accessing funds distributed through humanitarian channels:

*We have seen that an organisation like us or our partner (civil society) organisations, they end up outside of humanitarian work. They do humanitarian work, but they are not seen as humanitarian actors. They do not have access to funds that come via the humanitarian channels. This is a very concrete thing that happens very often. The UN storms in and sets up its big stuff and hires loads of people and pays more money. It has such incredible effects on society, and then you have these smaller women's rights organisations that shifted their focus from day one and were there (to address the humanitarian situation), but then they're kind of not allowed to be a part of it (Respondent 2).*

## 6.8 Sexual exploitation

The ongoing susceptibility of women in humanitarian settings can serve as an illustrative scenario within simulation games. A respondent reflected on the topic:

*We still see that women are hit hard when support is set up in humanitarian situations and they are still vulnerable despite all the work with gender markers and so on. ... Sextortion is very common in these situations (with big external interventions) (Respondent 2).*

The same theme was also brought up by another respondent:

*If you as an individual discover something about the organisation you work for. I mean, we've had many cases with for example sexual exploitation and so on. How can you act? What can you do when (how you act on this) may jeopardise the whole organisation or the whole mission? These are very big moral decisions (Respondent 1).*

## 7. Conclusion

This report, produced by the SHARINPEACE project, details the development of a course module on connecting peacebuilding and human rights, featuring an innovative simulation game. The project highlights how policymakers and practitioners navigate complex conflict landscapes, often focusing on either peacebuilding or human rights. The report delves into the nuances of this relationship, seeking to understand how it is perceived and operationalized in policy and practice. Additionally, it advocates for incorporating real-life problems into academic curricula to prepare students for ethical dilemmas and operational challenges. The module entails an initial study followed by a simulation game, where students assume roles in a real-life conflict scenario. The goal is to train students in understanding the complexity and urgency of human rights and peacebuilding issues, fostering their ability to become future policymakers and practitioners.

This report provides insights into the challenges and opportunities in the intersection between peacebuilding and human rights through expert interviews, aiming to deepen understanding and offer recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and educators. Ultimately, it

aims to contribute to efforts for a more just and peaceful world by identifying successful strategies and areas for further research and development.

As our initial endeavour took an explorative approach, our method allowed participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives. Thus, the report underscored several themes identified through interviews, including the interconnection between human rights and peacebuilding, timing considerations in taking action, potential coordination between peacebuilders and human rights defenders, and the relationship between local communities and international interventionists. Furthermore, respondents emphasised competencies essential in the recruitment processes, such as understanding conflict complexity, developing analytical skills, gaining knowledge of humanitarian advocacy, and familiarity with the support system within humanitarian crises. These insights are intended to inform the revision of the course, bridging peacebuilding and human rights perspectives effectively.

Finally, we featured several real-world examples identified by the respondents from their professional experiences. While not exhaustive, we consider this list to be rich in content. The experts interviewed within the scope of this report deemed these examples particularly compelling for inclusion in a simulation game aiming to enhance students' applied knowledge and critical thinking skills.

## 8. References

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