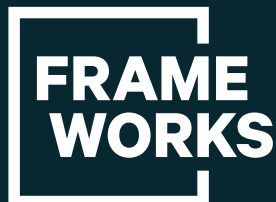# Communicating about Peace and Peacebuilding: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations

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FRAME WORKS

Alliance for Peacebuilding

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Contents

Introduction

Peace is widely recognized to be good, and yet peacebuilding stands at the periphery of our politics. This brief unpacks this seeming paradox, summarizing key findings from research on public perceptions of peace and peacebuilding.[1] It is situated within a broader project that the FrameWorks Institute is conducting—in partnership with Partners Global and the Alliance for Peacebuilding and sponsored by Humanity United and the Open Society Foundations—to develop strategies to communicate about and build support for peacebuilding. This framing research is a part of a larger Narratives for Peace Initiative, led by PartnersGlobal together with the Alliance for Peacebuilding, to bridge narrative theory and practice, and to promote wide-spread narrative competency within the civil society sector to improve our resiliency and restorative advocacy.

Some of the public's existing perceptions about peace are unproductive. For example, people frequently understand peace passively, as the absence of conflict, which makes it hard to think about peace as something that is built. Yet alongside less productive understandings are more positive ones, such as a more active understanding of peace that aligns with the work of the peacebuilding field.

Critically, the public recognizes the importance of both ideas *and* material resources in conflict and peace, yet people struggle to integrate the two in their thinking. People switch back and forth between seeing conflict as a clash of ideas and seeing it a clash of interests. They lack established ways of understanding how resources shape ideas, or how ideas shape the desire for resources. This makes it hard for people to understand how peacebuilding must take into account both ideas and resources. And because people toggle between thinking about conflict as driven by ideas *or* resources, they are susceptible to bad faith arguments that paint interested assertions of power as driven *solely* by principle.

This brief describes the challenges and opportunities for communication that result from the public's range of existing understandings of and assumptions about peace, conflict, peacebuilding, and US foreign policy. It also offers preliminary recommendations for responding to these challenges and opportunities, although further research will be needed to build on these findings and to develop the most effective ways of framing peacebuilding.

What Are We Trying to Communicate?

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about peace and peacebuilding, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to get across. To do this, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews and feedback sessions with members of the peacebuilding field. Below, we summarize the key ideas that emerged from this process, which represent the core points that need to be effectively communicated and the solutions that the field wants to build support for through communications. This includes general ideas about peace and peacebuilding, as well as specific ideas about US foreign policy that the field wants to be able to get across.

What are peace and peacebuilding?

— Peace is more than just the absence of violence, but also the presence of conditions that prevent violent conflict and harm and that promote social justice and cooperation.

— Peacebuilding is a long-term, strategic process that seeks to resolve the underlying causes of conflict.

— Peace can exist at inter-personal, -communal, -governmental, -national, regional, and transnational levels.

How is peace built?

— Peacebuilding requires skills in areas including diplomacy, conflict analysis, mediation, and trauma-healing.

— All people can integrate peacebuilding approaches in their lives and work. There are many who practice peacebuilding without identifying as peacebuilders.

— Peacebuilding efforts can be supported across sectors by a multilateral system of local, national, and international organizations.

What are the effects of peacebuilding?

— Peacebuilding leads to fewer acts—and threats—of violence and harm.

— Peace contributes to "social health" and affords people dignity.

— Peace contributes to increased national and global security. Pursuing peace within a region limits the threat of violence elsewhere.

— Peaceful societies are more prosperous, having greater access to the economic, material, and social resources they need.

— Peaceful societies are better equipped to address a range of existing and emerging global challenges, including climate change, global pandemics, economic disruptions, changes in immigration patterns, and others.

What barriers exist to US engagement in peacebuilding?

— US foreign policy has historically favored military and combat-oriented approaches to resolving global conflict.

— Short-term funding cycles limit the ability to evaluate and sustain peacebuilding.

— Peacebuilding initiatives are siloed and often disregard the local context.

— Local and international peacebuilders are often skeptical of US-led peacebuilding initiatives.

How can the US better support peacebuilding initiatives?

— Increase federal budgetary allotments for peacebuilding while decreasing combat-oriented military spending.

— Provide long-term (10-year) and cross-sector funding for peacebuilding.

— Prioritize local control, deferring to local peacebuilders and community leaders in program design and implementation.

— Incorporate peacebuilding into educational curricula and programming throughout K–16 education.

— Incorporate peacebuilding approaches into the work of existing cross-sector collaborations and departments within the US government.

Challenges and Opportunities

To understand how the American public thinks about peace and peacebuilding, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 one-on-one, 2-hour-long cognitive interviews with a diverse group of participants selected to look roughly like a cross section of the general public. These interviews were analyzed to identify the deep, implicit, often taken-for-granted ways of thinking that members of the public use to think about peace, conflict, peacebuilding, and US foreign policy.

It is crucial to center power in our analysis of these shared ways of thinking. As part of our culture, these tacit, taken-for-granted patterns of thinking grow out of a history structured by power relations, both internal power relations within American society and those between the US and the rest of the world. Our analysis attends to how dominant ways of thinking perpetuate existing modes of domination and violence. It also shows how some available ways of thinking—more promisingly—offer a basis for problematizing and contesting these ways of operating in the world.

Based on this research, we identify both challenges and opportunities that communicators face in getting across the key ideas the field wants to promote that are outlined above. We offer general recommendations about how to respond to challenges as well as leverage opportunities, which communicators can start using right now, with the important caveat that further research is needed to identify specific, evidence-based framing strategies the field can use to move public thinking in the right direction.

The challenges and opportunities are organized thematically, to highlight the important reality that while many of the public's assumptions are problematic, people are also able to think in more productive ways. We begin with challenges and opportunities that stem from people's ways of defining peace, conflict, and peacebuilding, and then move on to discuss challenges and opportunities that arise from public thinking about the causes of peace and conflict and about foreign policy.

Defining Peace, Conflict, and Peacebuilding

Challenge: Members of the public generally think about peace in passive terms, as the absence of conflict.

When people think of peace, they typically understand it as an absence of activity. This applies to thinking about peace both within individuals and between people and groups. Internally, peace is understood as a sense of calm, or having a quiet mind. When the same way of thinking is applied to peace between people or groups, it is understood as the absence of conflict—the lack of conflictual activity. In this way of thinking, peace is not thought of as a positive state, but is defined negatively by what it is not.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

When people think of peace in passive terms, this makes it hard to understand what peacebuilding involves or why it is necessary. This way of thinking assumes that peace happens naturally when people are removed from activity, rather than focusing attention on the active building of the positive and necessary conditions for peace. The passive sense of peace is thus a foundational obstacle to building understanding of the activities of peacebuilding.

Because this way of thinking is linked with the notion of internal peace, it can personalize the issue, which can potentially help people appreciate the value of peace but which also blocks a more collective orientation toward the issue.

How to address this challenge

Emphasize the work and activity of peacebuilding. Use verbs to talk about what peacebuilders do rather than focusing on peace as a state to be achieved.

Be careful about starting with internal peace and scaling up to collective peace. This is likely to cue passive thinking that makes it hard for people to think about peace as an active state.

Opportunity: Members of the public have access to a more active understanding of peace.

While people tend to draw on a passive understanding of peace, they do have access to a more active understanding of peace. In this way of thinking, peace is thought of as something that must be built or created between and among people. When people think of peace in this way, they view peace as the result of action, intention, and process.

In interviews, this understanding of peace was brought to the fore by the term "peacebuilding." Before the introduction of this term, participants only rarely drew on an active understanding of peace, but the term strongly cued this way of thinking.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across

This more active understanding of peace makes it easier for people to think about the need for and value of peacebuilding. When people see peace as something that must be created, this creates space for recognizing the need to take active steps to achieve it. In order for peacebuilders to succeed in promoting widespread understanding of peacebuilding, they will need ways of pulling forward and expanding this active understanding of peace.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Use the term "peacebuilding" widely and liberally. The term itself cues this active understanding of peace.

Stress that peace is built over time to help people see peace as the result of a process. Focusing on duration will likely make it harder for people to default back to a passive understanding.

Challenge: The public lacks understanding of *how* peacebuilding works and what it involves.

Although people generally react positively to the term "peacebuilding" and can, at moments, see the value of active work to build peace, they have little sense of what peacebuilding actually involves in practice and of how peace is actually built. The specific practices, programs, and institutions that comprise peacebuilding are simply not part of people's existing understanding.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

The lack of existing understanding of how peacebuilding actually works prevents people's openness to peacebuilding in principle from translating into practical support for specific peacebuilding policies and programs. Greater understanding of what peacebuilding involves needs to be generated in order for this to happen.

How to address this challenge

Provide examples of peacebuilding programs and policies to give people a concrete understanding of this work.

Talk about *who* is involved in peacebuilding. Be specific about the different actors involved to create a picture in people's minds of peacebuilding in practice.

Explain in a step-by-step fashion how peacebuilding works—what peacebuilders do, the immediate results of their actions, and how these actions add up over time to create the conditions for peace.

Challenge: The public's lack of basic information about world affairs constrains thinking about peace and conflict.

In interviews we found, not surprisingly and consistent with longstanding research on public knowledge, that most participants had extremely limited knowledge about world affairs and international relations.[2] Participants lacked basic information about conflicts around the world and American involvement in them, including current conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen and past conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

Lack of basic knowledge about world affairs limits people's ability to think concretely about how conflicts and peacebuilding efforts play out in practice. In addition, because people are not attuned to how much violence and suffering is happening on the planet, they can underestimate how important peacebuilding efforts are. Lack of understanding of the United States' role also makes it difficult for people to see specific problems with the country's approach.

Americans have greater familiarity with conflict at home than abroad, and one hypothesis among peacebuilders is that starting with discussion of peacebuilding in a domestic context could be a productive entry point for engaging people in thinking about peacebuilding in other

countries. This *might* be an effective way to deal with Americans' limited knowledge of and engagement with foreign policy, but further research is needed to determine if this strategy actually works. This is something we plan to explore in later stages of this project.

How to address this challenge

Don't assume that the general public knows the context you're speaking about. Make sure to provide basic information as part of your messages.

Situate basic facts within frames that advance your broader goals—like the frames recommended at other points in this brief. While it's important to include key facts rather than taking them for granted, it's also important not to assume that facts speak for themselves. Absent a productive frame, people interpret facts using their default understandings.

Causes of Peace and Conflict

Challenge: Members of the public often assume that conflict and violence are intrinsic, inevitable features of human life and society.

People frequently assume that conflict in general, and violent conflict in particular, are intrinsic features of human life. At times, they assume that living together in society makes conflict inevitable because there will always be collective decisions about which people will disagree. Likewise, they assume that many disagreements will inevitably escalate into violence. At other points, they trace conflict to human nature itself, and see violence as an outgrowth of the natural fact that human beings are animals who compete to survive and take what they can. In each case, some measure of conflict—including violent conflict—is assumed to be unavoidable.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

The idea that violent conflict is intrinsic to the human condition leads to fatalism about the possibility of building peace, undermining the rationale for peacebuilding efforts. If durable peace is impossible, then efforts to promote it are pointless.

How to address this challenge

Be careful about mentioning human nature, as this can easily lead to fatalism.

Foreground solutions rather than focusing on problems. While it is important to discuss the need to address the roots of violent conflict, dwelling on the depth of these roots is likely to activate the idea that these roots are buried so deep in the human condition that they're inseparable from it.

Opportunity: Members of the public *can* think about peace as natural or as a choice we can make.

Although people often assume that conflict is inevitable, there are alternative ways of thinking that people sometimes rely on and that contradict this idea. At times, people see *peace*, not conflict, as our natural condition. In this way of thinking, violent conflict is a distortion of our baseline state. Peace, in this way of thinking, is something that *can* be restored if the sources of violent conflict are addressed. At other times, people see peace as an active choice, something individuals and groups can make happen if they decide to.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across

The idea that peace is natural, or that it is a choice, can be leveraged to counter the notion that conflict is inevitable. These ways of thinking foster a sense of efficacy about the possibility of building peace.

It is important, however, to note that these ways of thinking themselves have potential downsides. The idea that peace is natural can easily slip into a passive view of peace as something that just happens when conflict stops, rather than as something that must be actively built. And the idea of peace as a choice does not itself explain *how* peace comes about. Without a clearer sense of the process and work of peacebuilding, this could slip into the notion that peace is the result of flipping a volitional switch.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Highlight examples of durable peace to pull forward the sense that peace can be built. Examples of peace are likely to reinforce the notion of peace as a baseline expectation.

Explain the work of peacebuilding that accompanies the choice to build or restore peace. This is important to avoid thinking that peace is an "easy" choice.

Opportunity + Challenge: People are able to think about the role of both material resources and ideas in peace and conflict, but they struggle to integrate thinking about these factors.

Members of the public switch back and forth between thinking about peace and conflict in material terms and seeing them as the product of people's ideas about the world. At times, people see conflict in material terms, as the result of a clash of interests (e.g., competition over scarce resources) or greed (e.g., the desire for oil and the wealth that accompanies it). Material thinking about peace, in turn, is about negotiating these conflicts of interests. At other times, people assume that conflict results from disagreement over ideas (e.g., religious worldviews), and think that peace is the result of agreeing to disagree—an end that is often seen as the goal of diplomacy.

While people are able to see the role of both material resources and ideas in conflict and peace, they have a hard time understanding how the two interact—how resources shape ideas and ideas channel perceptions of and desire for resources.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get some points across and *harder* to get others across

The existing recognition that both ideas and resources matter is an opportunity. Communicators can readily engage the public about either ideas or resources and use the recognition of the importance of both as a starting point for talking about the sources of peace and conflict.

Yet the common difficulty in integrating thinking about ideas and resources poses a challenge. Because people tend to switch back and forth between thinking about ideas *or* about resources, rather than about both, they are susceptible to bad faith arguments that intentionally background key motivations (e.g., painting a war as a principled conflict about values like freedom and democracy rather than as an attempt to control material resources).

How to take advantage of this opportunity and address this challenge

Pair mentions of ideas and resources when talking about the sources of conflict and peace to bring both to mind simultaneously.

Explain how ideas and resources interact to bring about conflict or peace, offering examples to illustrate the point.

Opportunity: There is some sense that common threats—including pandemics—can yield common purpose and peace.

In interviews, which were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, participants occasionally suggested that common threats to humanity, like climate change or global pandemics, have the potential to bring about peace and collaboration between countries. In this way of thinking, shared threats are seen to create a sense of common purpose and solidarity.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across

The recognition that common threats (like the pandemic now, and climate change longer term) can unite people opens space for taking a collaborative, peacebuilding approach in this moment and into the future. It also creates an opportunity for linking peace and security—that by preparing for and working to prevent and address common threats, we increase our shared security and create more peace.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Highlight the commonality of threats to humanity to build a sense of solidarity and make the case for collaboration and peacebuilding.

Emphasize that working together to address common threats builds mutual peace *and* security for the future to help establish the link between peace and security in public thinking.

Foreign Policy

Challenge: The public thinks about the military as a critical source of protection and security.

Members of the public widely assume that the US military's primary goal and role is protecting the country. People assume that a strong military is the key way to ensure the protection of the American people. People frequently suggest that the military achieves protection through deterrence—dissuading other actors from attacking in the first place. In this way of thinking, military deterrence actually limits violence.

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to get key points across

The assumption that a strong military is an effective way to achieve protection and security makes it hard to recognize that non-militarized strategies are actually the best way to achieve security. In addition, it mutes attention to how frequently the United States uses its military for purposes other than protection.

How to address this challenge

Explain how peacebuilding protects people and builds security to begin disrupting the automatic link people make between the military and protection.

Give examples of how uses of the military have resulted in compromised security to unsettle the association between the military and protection.

Challenge: Members of the public assume that America needs to "stay on top" by having the strongest military.

As many have long recognized, American exceptionalism powerfully animates American opinion and action. Members of the public take for granted that America is and must be exceptional in both its power and ideas. Americans widely prize the country's position as *the* global superpower and assume that we need the strongest military in the world to protect our interests and ideals.

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to get key points across

The idea that America must stay on top through military strength furthers a militarized foreign policy. If the public sees the US military as the guarantor of the country's global status, they will insist on reliance on the military even when they recognize that non-military approaches (e.g., diplomacy) are the best way to handle most conflicts.

How to address this challenge

Avoid dwelling on America's status as a superpower. This is likely to activate a sense of American exceptionalism, which is imbued with militarism.

Opportunity: The public widely recognizes the need for more diplomacy.

While the public widely takes for granted that a strong military is good, people overwhelmingly recognize the value of diplomacy and relationship-building between political leaders. People see greater diplomacy as essential for a more peaceful world. However—importantly—they lack a clear understanding of how diplomacy works and fail to see the complex systems and interests at stake in diplomatic interactions.

It is worth noting that, when thinking about diplomacy, the public focuses almost exclusively on national leaders, paying much less attention to the power of relationship building at the level of communities, individuals, and other non-state actors.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across

The recognition that diplomacy is often the best way to prevent and resolve conflicts is a highly useful starting point, although this understanding must be expanded to include a fuller sense of what diplomacy involves and the infrastructure that enables it to be effective. Absent this understanding, it is easy for people to think that diplomats can easily choose to "agree to disagree" and to underestimate the difficulty of this work. Explaining how diplomacy works is also critical to help people see that a diplomacy-centered foreign policy looks very different from the United States' traditional militarized foreign policy.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Be explicit that diplomacy is form of peacebuilding. While people have positive associations with both, they do not always associate them. Making the link can help deepen understanding.

Foreground the systems and institutions that enable diplomacy to strengthen understanding of how it works and what it requires.

Discuss how diplomacy involves negotiations about both conflicts of ideas and interests to help people see the complexity of the problems that diplomacy must handle.

Opportunity: People readily connect economic inequality and poverty with conflict and see economic measures as an important way to prevent conflict.

In explaining the sources of conflict, people frequently think about economic inequality, noting that poverty and deprivation can drive people into conflict. In turn, they recognize that promoting greater economic equality within and between nations can help to prevent conflict and promote peace. At times, people even recognize the virtuous circle here—that economic prosperity promotes peace and that peace, in turn, promotes prosperity.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across

When people recognize the economic roots (and outcomes) of conflict and peace, this orients them toward non-militaristic solutions and global development work. It also helps people see how countries' fates are interdependent, which helps to counter isolationism and promote positive sum thinking.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Highlight the role of economic factors in peace and conflict to disrupt the public's tendency to focus on the military.

Connect peacebuilding to economic development to help people see how peacebuilding addresses widely recognized economic sources of conflict.

Endnotes

1. A fuller description of the data and methods behind this research is available as a supplement to this brief.

2. There is a longstanding body of research on Americans' limited knowledge of international affairs. For a representative example, see Iyengar, S., Hahn, K. S., Bonfadelli, H., & Marr, M. (2009) "Dark Areas of Ignorance" Revisited: Comparing International Affairs Knowledge in Switzerland and the United States. *Communication Research* 36, no. 3: 341–358.

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