Researching Peace Education: My Journey to the 28th Biennial IPRA General Conference Nairobi

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The 28th Biennial IPRA General Conference on PEACE TECHNOLOGY Positioning Fourth Industrial Revolution and Emerging Technologies in Global Peace was held from 11th to 15th January 2021 at Multimedia University of Kenya Nairobi, Kenya.

The conference started with the welcoming opening ceremony on Monday January 11, 2021 followed by key note speeches and sessions related to themes of the conference. All sessions were followed by question/answer sessions and discussions along with a way forward to further research and moving towards peaceful societies.

Most of the researches involved multidisciplinary research approaches incorporating case studies of institutions, societies or nations. Each day of the conference ended with a networking tea and a documentary on various themes which led to the development of new ideas and practical solutions. The different perspectives which inspired me included the thoughts about Peace Building in different perspectives which had Implications for Peace Research in general and educational aspects in particular. I am overwhelmed by the continuous support and swift replies to my emails before travelling to Kenya and also during my memoir by the team.

My research was related to Peace Education Commission titled “Analysis of Curriculum of Teacher Education for Civic, Peace and Tolerance Education”. As a teacher educator I am working with pre-service teachers in Pakistan. I always value the power of teachers in transforming the nations, especially those teaching at elementary schools. The research was undertaken to know the extent which Civic, Peace and Tolerance Education has been addressed in the curriculum of the B.Ed. (Hons) Elementary Education programme to develop peacebuilding in prospective teachers.

The findings of the study would be a guiding force towards inclusion of Civic, Peace and Tolerance Education in the curriculum and pedagogy of pre-service teacher education in Pakistan with a focus on peace-making through building resilience in future school teachers for them to transmit those values in elementary level school children. The concept of peace education in pre-service teacher education—long term solution and strategies for social conflicts prevention and peace building, analytical power, positive attitude, practical skills, awareness about conflict resolution, promoting democratic attitude and Peace building in society— are missing in most courses taught in pre-service teacher education.

As a teacher educator I am always mindful for other genders, opinion and expression, open-mindedness for other genders, freedom of opinion and expression, open-mindedness for other genders, interest to live with other creeds, respect and the underlying idea for the students’ emotional stability. However, these concepts lack in most pre-service teacher education courses. Realizing that the curriculum of pre-service teacher education requires reforms focusing on peacebuilding could be the first step towards improvement.

All the participants from across the globe, various continents and backgrounds, scholars, academicians, practitioners and peace researchers learned from the case studies of developing peace especially during Covid-19 scenario. The conference ended with a closing ceremony, practical recommendations were provided along with take home messages from various fields and with the hope of meeting again in next IPRA activities and conferences. The conference ended on January 15,2021 but the journey continued. I along with few participants opted for the Safari Tour to Maasai Mara, enjoying it despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

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“My deepest gratitude for the opportunity to attend IPRA 2021 Nairobi Conference. I have learnt so much. Thank you very much for the wonderful opportunity.”

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The 28th biennial general conference of the INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH ASSOCIATION (IPRA) on ‘PEACE TECHNOLOGY: POSITIONING FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES IN FOSTERING GLOBAL PEACE’ held in Nairobi, Kenya in January 2022, and in the Multiversity Campus Eldoret, Kenya, noted with an address by high ranking officials from the host University, led by the Chief Guest and Vice Chancellor Professor Amb, who inaugurated the occasion together with Prof. Paul Mbatia, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic Affairs. Research, Innovation and Information.

Christine Allen, Secretary-General of the International Peace Research Association (IPRA).

Despite stringent travel restrictions imposed by various governments internationally to contain the COVID-19 virus, personal precautions to be observed, challenges of technology, differing time zones across the globe compounded the setbacks. Nonetheless, the conference was able to successfully run amidst these challenges.

Recapping the highs, Duncan Ongoma from the Social Research Council, USA, and colleagues in the Media, Conflict, Journalists commission mastering of social media discussing the role and responsibility of digital media in promoting electoral democracy and human rights, digital media and democracy debate from delegates. Happening amidst social media shutdown and free speech censorship in Uganda ahead of parliamentary and presidential elections, the power of social media was noted in providing—especially the marginalized—a platform to voice concerns, debate alternative avenues and an avenue for communication and mobilization. It was conversely noted that the power of social media can be misused by those in power to promote sectarian proposals as it happened in the just concluded USA elections in which the incumbent, Donald Trump, lost but sort to wedging a majorly propagandist campaign on social media platforms about governance is currently noted to have the potential as the hope and future of democracy. It however, faces great hostility from individuals, an avenue and tool through which they can potentially directly disseminate information on (mis)governance activities, ability to document through texts, photographs and/or videos of governance being misused, the public have the accountability from their respective governments. Unlike with advances in mobile and internet connectivity and as minimal, the number has the potential to grow exponentially with the number of social media platforms about governance is currently noted to have the potential as the hope and future of democracy despite limited results in promoting democracy but can and has served as a valuable tool in this endeavour.

The session noted that social media alone can achieve limited results in promoting democracy but social media platforms are like a responsive tool in this endeavour. Despite limitations and setbacks, social or digital media was, thus, noted to hybridize information, the more as the hope and future of democratic participation in the globe. Though the percentage of the population that engages in discussions on social media platforms about governance is currently minimal, the number has the potential to grow exponentially with advances in mobile and internet connectivity and as a tool to promote good governance and demand accountability results in promoting democracy both on and off the governments. Mainstream media, with social media, the public have the ability to document through texts, photographs and/or videos and to aggregate information on (mis)governance activities, from the mundane to the abusive, without much censure and prohibitions from their governments. Therefore, social media provides the public access to a crucial mechanism, avenue and tool through which they can potentially directly engage governance, deliberate, mobilize and democratize. However, faces great hostility from individuals, regimes and institutions hostile to its use as emancipatory space much as it poses a major threat to traditionally despotic totalitarian systems.

On the 2nd day of the conference, in the Nonviolence and Peace Movement Commission absolutely wonderful presentations were made by Lester Kurtz based in South Korea. His presentation was on a tragic spectacle on the Korean peninsula which interlinks militarism, pandemics such as the Covid-19, racism, poverty, and the climate change crisis and which calls for Gandhian non-violence policy solutions. Aslam Khan very sharply analysed on-going civil resistance movement and farmers protests in India, its pros and cons and the probable political agendas that instigate these. He very categorically pointed out the nexus of media, corporations and the government in the crisis.

My first presentation discussed how Kenyans have innovatively appropriated and instrumentalized significant aspects of mobile and internet connectivity to not only express discontent but also publicise grievances and voice concerns of (mis)governance. With perfect illustrations from everyday lives in Kenya, the research put into perspective a technological reality of everyday lives, the everyday resistances, the sources that drive discontent, and contextualised the related meanings and implications to Kenyans and the Kenyan context. The second research, within the Peace and Ecology in the Anthropocene Commission, focused on land tenure and climate justice were raised in which indigenous pastoral communities face the most challenges with particular reference to the Maasai of Laikipia plateau.

Where and how do you dispose your electronic waste, for example damaged, disposed and derelict fridges, microwaves, iPads, computers, cell-phones, computer batteries, chargers and others? How environmentally safe is your disposal? These were viable plenary questions raised by Dr Virginia Onyara of Multimedia University of Kenya. She reminded the conference of the health and environmental impact of electronic waste pollution in Africa, emphasising the fact that Africa still lacks the technological capacity and policy frameworks to guide electronic waste disposal and recycling.
The International Peace Research Association or IPRA Conference 2021 was held at Multimedia University, Nairobi, Kenya from 11th January to 15th January 2021. It was a very fruitful conference for a few reasons: firstly, due to the pandemic COVID-19, the organizers took a very bold decision to organize such a big global event maintaining COVID-19 protocol with frequent communication with the participants. The host university heartily welcomed the participants with good arrangements of foods and refreshments. The Honourable Vice-Chancellor of Multimedia University of Kenya delivered an outstanding keynote speech and tried to address the major challenges before the global communities in the present global order. In significance, IPRA Conference 2021 Nairobi, marked my first physical mode of a big trans-disciplinary academic conference in the ‘new normal world order’ which sends a message to the global academicians to have a new-start of academic events in physical-mode. More so, during the conference, the scholars interacted with each other for a further endeavor of peace research. Personally, it was enriching to interact with scholars from across the globe. Indeed, it was possible because of the multi-dimensional themes of the sessions. Apart from physical-mode paper presentations, the parallel panels and workshops were also successfully organized through online mode. Throughout the conference, the observed, cross-cultural interactions among the scholars on the side-lines of the conference. Many of them shared their local experiences that they have been interacting with each other for a further endeavor of peace research. The IPRA platform serves as the right place for collectively rethinking of the establishment of peace. How Studies can think over the alternative paths of the world order. India and Pakistan peace after the horrific experience of the Second World War. India and Pakistan are almost Pakistan on Kashmir issue are almost South Korea, Israel building that can be the theme for further research. The scholars of Peace Studies can take a vital role in peace-building that can be the theme for further research. The IPRA platform serves as the right place for collectively rethinking of the global peace. I do hope, IPRA will take further initiatives for imperial research on India and Pakistan peace after the horrific experience of the Second World War. India and Pakistan on Kashmir issue are almost South Korea, Israel building that can be the theme for further research. The scholars of Peace Studies can take a vital role in peace-building that can be the theme for further research. The IPRA platform serves as the right place for collectively rethinking of the global peace. I do hope, IPRA will take further initiatives for imperial research on global peace and strongly suggest that Peace Studies, be popularised by International Peace Research Association in the coming days. We, members at all institutional levels can initiate the introduction of Peace studies in our university curriculums.
The Journalism and media commission at the recently concluded IPRA conference in Nairobi featured interesting papers on journalism, digitally and democracy. Many of the papers focused on the Global South, with insights into Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and the Ivory Coast. The papers covered the whole gamut of digitality in the continent-ranging from shutdowns and internet policing, legal frameworks on cyberspace, decolonization and digitality, elections and trust, and the abiding discussion on disinformation and online hate speech.

On the first day, Dr. Emily Comfort Maractho, a senior lecturer and Head of Department for Journalism and Media Studies at Uganda Christian University, provided a nearly prophetic insight into the situation of the internet just a day before Uganda went to the polls. In this paper, Dr. Maractho argued that government response (to the internet) in the 2016 elections had profound imprints for the 2021 electoral process. Indeed, the government of Uganda exploited the ongoing ‘Covid-19’ public health responses to mount an internet blockade, giving credibility to previous doubts on the fairness of the election. Afterwards, Dr Duncan Omanga, program officer of Africa Peace Network (APN) at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), provided insights into how the last three elections in Kenya have shaped conceptions of digitality, through constructions of a techno-utopic state. Using the last three major elections in Kenya, he explained how political space and digital media are dialectically shaped in the country. Taking a critical view, he revealed how digital media in Kenya’s post 1990s liberalized political culture furnished innovation, experimentation, digital humanitarianism, and more crucially how Kenya became laboratory for disinformation and electoral interference abroad.

Abdulhakim Noebya, a doctoral student at the University of Cape Town, looked at how Ugandan Facebook users in demonstrated contestation on the question of voting among Salafi-Muslim community, taking a deep dive into the relationship between democracy and Islamic law (sharia) among Salafis there. The paper explored the use of social media by contending Salafi groups in Uganda and their responses to the question of voting.

On the second day of the commission, Dr Bernadine Jones of University of Stirling presented a paper titled ‘Digital Reports situated the US based Carter Center election mission reports on Kenya’. The paper revealed that the United States Carter Center’s election monitoring missions and development projects were resilient and more organized in comparison to earlier protest movements partly because of the extensive use of the digital media. The digital (social) media not only helped to link diaspora-based opposition leaders (activists) and the youth protesters but also created a platform for collective action. As the commission sessions concluded, the focus shifted to Kenya, where Dr Jacinta Maweu from University of Nairobi examined how social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp) were used by citizens and politicians to spread disinformation and political propaganda during South African election news coverage: ramifications for the whole gamut of digitality in the continent ranging from shutdowns and internet policing, legal frameworks on cyberspace, decolonization and digitality, elections and trust, and the abiding discussion on disinformation and online hate speech.

In conclusion, the papers presented in the media and journalism commission reveal that the digital space is not just a new space with new social realities, but an extension of the old realities that have dominated discussions of peace and security in the continent for ages.
In the wake of the January 6th attacks, I made my way to the IPRA 28th biennial conference in Nairobi on January 8th. In total it took about 33 hours before I was checked in. It was dramatic to transition from near total isolation to being present at an International Conference. “Peace Technology” was not the theme I wanted, but it was the topic we needed—the conference was as much in-person as online—the intersection of theory and praxis.

I felt like I needed to be in Nairobi. The last two years were indeed an abundant source for conversations, but the global pandemic not only changed all of our discussions but how we had them. A year ago when I started collecting data I had no imagination that January 2021 would be presented with spiking covid cases and threats of new strains. The duality—I was in person for the conference and meanwhile all of my teaching is asynchronous—was not lost on me.

In a conversation with Fouzia Ajmal, I recognized a common challenge: training people with best practices do not guarantee the use of best practices. Her data was as convincing for my experiences in the United States as it was for her context in Pakistan and I was simultaneously guilty and defensive to satisficing in my own classrooms during the pandemic. It was nice to commune with colleagues and lament the honest limitations and struggles to our work (both individually and collectively) since we have last had the chance to meet.

Over tea break, I had the chance to talk with other friends from Africa about the apparent coup d’état staged by Donald Trump. We half joked that the U.S. could learn something about the peaceful transition of power by watching Uganda's election. We revisited themes of political violence, and someone suggested the broken glass could be left as a reminder. We talked about scars and memory and one of the best reasons to remember the broken glass is that it reminds us of the reasons we are committed to peace.

Roy Tamashiro redoubled my awareness of the transformative potential of the pilgrimage. I think my favorite conversations at IPRA 2021 Nairobi were about our callings. Not just the work that we do but what brings us together. I truly appreciated everyone who joined across the many time zones. Despite adversity, I will openly wonder if we have not proven that we can and should make better use of technology in maintaining our connections? Two years always feels too long.
When I received invitation for the conference in Nairobi, I was delighted. I had missed a few IPRA conferences in the past, and did not want to miss it this time. However, I was worried that my family might resist. They did not, because they were aware of my longstanding romance with IPRA and APPRA. As such, I was denied the opportunity to use an argument I had crafted for them: ‘Covid-19 is like love and it will happen anywhere if it has to happen’. Anyway, fortune was clearly smiling. It smiled again at Karachi International Airport, when the Qatar Airways crew told me that I was being transferred free to the Business class, because I was a university professor. However, the Qatar Airways corrected itself during my return journey from Nairobi to Karachi: my privilege of economy class was restored.

The IPRA 2021 Nairobi conference was finally realized as had been planned and attracted a number of scholars from outside Kenya. However, the hustle and bustle, the festive look, the presentations of peace scholars on the podiums and the lively question-answer sessions, the movement of scholars from one conference room to another, the opportunity of socialization, networking, and active plus hectic intellectual discourses were missing. Also missing were scores of leading IPRA members and many former and current office bearers, though a number of them presented papers online.

For the first time, technology had almost completely taken over an IPRA General Conference. As my laptop had broken down on the first day of the conference, and I used the laptop of the conference hosts from time to time, I missed many online presentations. It provided me ample time to watch the proceedings in the conference hall and rooms. It seemed to me as if the presenters of the papers and those asking questions were not on the stage: only the laptops were there. Worse still, the concern of everybody seemed to be as to how would the laptop, the ‘new god’, behave and not the freely floating ideas. While all the delegates physically present in the conference were serious listeners, the joy and excitement of learning something new was rarely reflected or expressed.

It is painful, because a number of presentations were really very good. For instance, the online presentations by Olga Vorkunova on ‘Toward a Culture of Peacebuilding and Complex Identity in the Post-Covid World’ and Linda Groff’s, ‘Reframing Reality for the Coronavirus Age: Implications for Peace Studies, Future Studies, and Almost All Areas of Our Outer and Inner Lives’ were brilliant.

In short, IPRA 2021 Nairobi conference was a dream which came true, but on occasions it was also nightmarish. Having said this, I must add that IPRA’s current Secretary Generals Matt Meyer and Christine Atieno, Conveners of different IPRA Commissions, Council members and members of the Conference Organizing Committee should be congratulated for making the conference happen during these coronavirus times.
As we know, the global crisis caused by COVID-19 has had the tremendous impact of shifting a voluntary amount of human transactions via the use of ICT. This was the case for conferences, meetings, and online courses which has been the case in the field of mediation and peacemaking.

Lockdowns made travel difficult. Political processes were suspended or delayed and once revived, could not be done through online means. Efforts to convene were affected by the incidence of transmission of the viral disease. For example, the drafting of the new constitution for Syria in assemblies held in Geneva was marred by cases of infection. This is a UN facilitated process being undertaken by a constituent assembly where 1/3 was appointed by the regime, another 1/3 by the conglomeration of mostly exiled Syrian opposition, and another 1/3 selected by the UN.

For most, meetings had to be conducted online using newly developed or enhanced apps like Zoom, Webex and Microsoft Teams. This has allowed for several peace talks to move forward—from Yemen, Afghanistan, to name a few.

Long before the pandemic, many online consultations and workshops have already allowed people to come together and discuss pressing issues and map out plans of action. A good example is how the Corona Dialogue platform organized in 2015 by three displaced persons who have relocated to eastern Ukraine.

The constitution-drafting process in Fiji in 2012 was also advanced by the use of digital tools by experts who actively participated in the process. The women contributed almost one-third of the new constitution, and a big component in the Colombian peace agreement.

The African Union facilitation team for the process in the Democratic Republic of Congo set up in 2016 a WhatsApp group and Twitter account where commentators, pictures, schedules and other reports and documents were shared, since it could not address all the journalists and civil society groups who contacted them.

Mediators and negotiators, peace builders, governments and international organizations have realized how useful ICT has been. The use of digital tools has allowed several peace talks to move forward.

Consider also how technology opens up a process for inclusion, but can also shut it down for others. Women and civil society groups who once were able to be outside the room where talks are being held are now unable to make their presence felt without the password. Passwords, as we know, provide security features that support the process. Trust and privacy issues, hacking and surveillance, data breaches—these can easily derail a mediation process. But on the other side of the coin, passwords also lock out other stakeholders.

Inequitable access to ICT has widened the gap between those who can afford and those who are wanting. Those in remote conflict areas have much poorer access. They might not even have electricity. Or there could be the language barrier. Moreover, they face serious threat to their physical security from the contending armed groups. They can easily be "punished" for standing up and using social media to ventilate their demands to stop the violence, exact accountability from perpetuators, and seek justice to the victims.

Finally, state surveillance and control of access to internet sites can unduly exacerbate the balance in the state’s favor in asymmetric conflicts.

Sexism and sexual harassment proliferate online. As a female government negotiator who was highly visible in public sphere during the peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Chief Signatory to the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro.

Solutions being drawn out in the negotiating room.

Online surveys and assessing exchanges in social media give negotiators insights on the contending narratives and a good sense of the public discourse on the issues. On the other side, mediators and negotiators can more smartly design their analysis, and other reports and documents were released, since it could not address all the journalists and civil society groups who contacted them.

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Consider: technology has been the main conduit for the rise of radicalized cells engaged in violent extremism of asymmetric conflicts.

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Beyond the technology, the core issues remain the same. We see armed actors who are immune to the suffering they inflict on the populace. Short term political interests of elites and counter-elites prevail over the common good.

Shortly after the global pandemic set in early 2020, UNSG Antonio Guterres called for a global ceasefire among warring parties in the interest of public health and safety and the tremendous requirements of such. Various world leaders, regional organizations like the AU and EU and several armed opposition groups – in Sudan, Cameroon, the Philippines, Colombia, responded positively. Fifty-four member states endorsed the appeal.

However, fighting resumed in many of these places shortly after.

Unfortunately, the prolonged pandemic has not caused a substantive reexamination of the handy use of political violence by both state and non-state actors. The public health has not sufficiently strengthened the recourse to democratic means in order to settle conflicts. The old ways of doing and thinking have not been transformed. Among those in power, there is depravity in political will to effect real changes.

Just consider, 20 years after passing UN Security Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and several supporting resolutions after, only 86 UN Member states or a mere 45% have NAP (National Action Plans) on 1325. Of those who have NAPs, only one-third have an allocated budget for implementation. Only 28 NAPs (or 31%) mention disarmament and provide specific actions to disarm society.

While 75 give specified implementation roles to civil society, the cited role is often limited to an “advisory” position.

What does this tell us about commitments not being matched by deeds?

Indeed, ICT can support peace processes and peacebuilding but it is not a panacea. It can facilitate, but its purpose is determined by its wielder.

The future of peace lies not on these tools but in the hearts and minds of humans. We may add, it lies on the fingers that click the mouse.

************************THANK YOU******************************