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Peace Is the Answer for Our Post-Pandemic World

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Abstract

Humanity is facing a series of existential threats unlike any it has experienced before in its short history. They are driven mainly by overpopulation, increasingly impactful advancements in technology, and now a pandemic. Countering these threats will require a new way of conceptualizing our relationships with each other and the ecosystems we depend on. The world needs a new approach that will allow us to adapt in the short term and reverse the decline in the long term.

Peace is central to a safe and productive society. Without peace, we will never achieve the level of trust, cooperation, and inclusiveness necessary to solve the global challenges humanity faces.

This article presents Positive Peace, combined with systems thinking, as a new theory of change, a new way to conceptualize how societies function, and a new approach to solving the world's most intractable problems.

Steve Killelea is the founder and chairman of the Institute for Economics & Peace. The Institute for Economics & Peace is a global think tank using data-driven research to show that peace is a positive, tangible, and achievable measure of human well-being and development. Each year, the institute produces the Global Peace Index, the Global Terrorism Index, the Positive Peace Index, the Ecological Threat Register, and a range of other reports.

While I write this article, the world is watching the introduction of a new vaccine to fight against COVID-19, a pandemic that has left more than a million dead and severely disrupted the global system, showing us just how interconnected, fragile, and complex our world is. COVID-19 has put immense pressure on already strained social systems and exacerbated long-existing sociopolitical tensions; it is a once-in-a hundred-years event and its full socioeconomic impact may not be known for years. We are living in an uncertain period. And yet, the world now has an opportunity to reset. But unless we address global problems with new approaches, we will not meet these challenges.

In this article, I argue that peace can provide us with the blueprint for a post-COVID-19 recovery and long-term sustainability. Drawing on my book *Peace in the Age of Chaos*[1] and a variety of reports produced by the Institute for Economics & Peace, I begin by demonstrating the current state of the world using data-based evidence. In the second section, I argue that Positive Peace has the potential to transform some of our world's most pressing problems. In the third and final section, I explain the concept of Positive Peace and its theoretical foundation based on systems thinking. In a short conclusion I summarize the significance of systems thinking and Positive Peace for a sustainable future.

The State of the World

The latest edition of the Global Peace Index (GPI) shows that the world is now considerably less peaceful than it was a decade ago.[2] Between 2008 and 2020, eighty-one countries became less peaceful compared with seventy-nine countries that became more peaceful. During that time, global levels of peace declined by 2.49 percent. The gap between the least and the most peaceful countries grew. Since 2008, the twenty-five least peaceful countries declined on average by 12.9 percent, while the twenty-five most peaceful countries improved by 2.1 percent, highlighting that improvements in peace are much slower than falls (Figure 1).
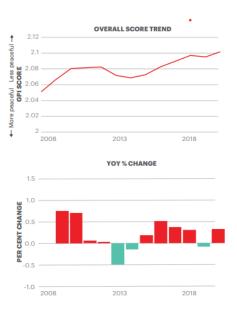

Figure 1. GPI overall trend and year-on-year percentage change, 2008–2020 (source: IEP)

Countries across the globe are also facing serious ecological threats, and these threats are expected to become more intense in the coming decade. The Ecological Threat Register (ETR)[3] identifies two groups of countries whose levels of social resilience may not be able to withstand the ecological threats they face. The first group are those that face major resource constraints

due to water scarcity, food insecurity, and population growth. The second group are those that face major threats from natural disasters, such as floods, cyclones, and droughts. After considering the level of societal resilience in these two groups of countries, using the Positive Peace framework devised by the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), the ETR found that there are approximately 1.2 billion people living in countries that do not have the resilience to deal with the ecological changes they are expected to face between now and 2050. The ETR findings also demonstrate the precarious nexus between fragility, resource depletion, and conflict. The report found nineteen countries that are exposed to four or more ecological threats, and ten of these countries rank among the forty least peaceful countries on the GPI (Figure 2). In addition, a majority of the countries in this group are either low-income or lower-middle-income countries. For example, Afghanistan is exposed to six ecological threats, the highest exposure of any country measured in the ETR, and it is ranked the least peaceful country globally.
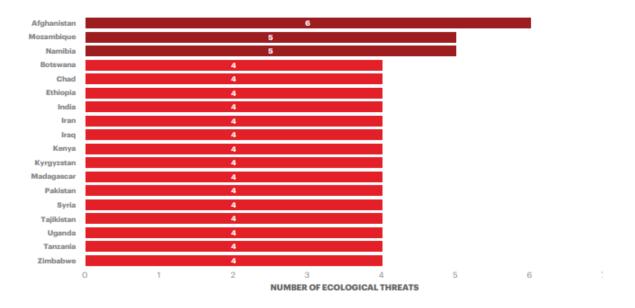

Figure 2. Countries most affected by ecological threats (source: IEP)

Research into global levels of Positive Peace show that it has improved 2.6 percent over the past decade. The United States, however, has deteriorated substantially in this area, as have many European countries. This body of research analyzes the underlying societal factors that sustain peace and strengthen resilience within a country. In the United States, the considerable deterioration has happened mainly over the past six years, with the key drivers including increasingly polarized political debate, growing tensions between socioeconomic or racial groups, and a deterioration in the quality of information available to the public, with opinion and propaganda often masquerading as news.[4]

Over the past decade, incidents of civil unrest around the world have doubled according to the GPI, a sign that socioeconomic and political instability is increasing around the world (Figure 3). Even before the widespread demonstrations seen in 2020, social and political instability had been on the rise in the West, with nearly seventy violent demonstrations recorded in 2019, compared with only nineteen in 2011.[5] Over the past decade, measures of societal resilience have been falling in many of the economically advanced economies and this trend is likely to continue because of the extended economic downturn caused by COVID-19.
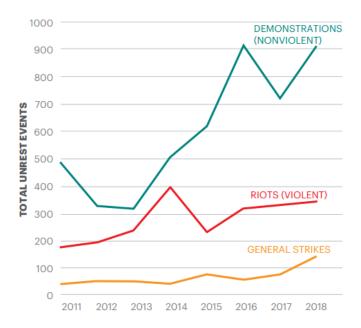
Figure 3. Global trends in civil unrest, 2011–2018 (source: Cross-National Time Series; IEP calculations)

While the prospects of the COVID-19 vaccine and improvements to health are positive, the journey out of the global recession caused by the pandemic will be long and arduous, but some countries will fare better than others. Analysis from the "COVID-19 and Peace" report shows that some countries combine favorable economic preconditions for a post-pandemic recovery with higher levels of Positive Peace, as measured by the Positive Peace Index, while others do comparatively less well in both criteria (Figure 4).[6] Before the pandemic, some countries combined high levels of Positive Peace and favorable economic conditions. These countries, such as Switzerland, Australia, and New Zealand, will be better positioned to implement robust post-pandemic recovery programs. Other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Spain, and France, are strong in Positive Peace but weaker in economic preconditions, suggesting that economic management—rather than social, institutional development—will be a focus in the recovery.
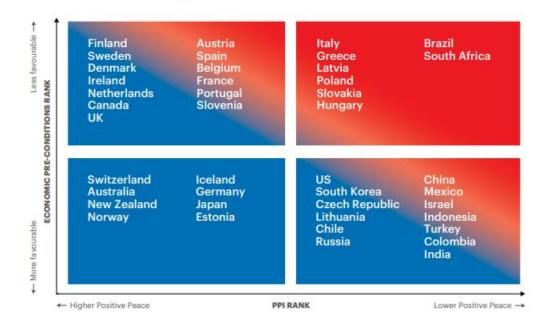
Figure 4. Positive Peace and economic resilience for post-pandemic recovery, 2018 (source IEP)

Why Positive Peace Is Transformational

Positive Peace is a transformational concept. Empirically based, it shifts the focus away from the negative to the positive aspects that create the conditions for a society to flourish. Because it is systemic, improvements in Positive Peace are associated with many desirable outcomes for society, such as higher GDP growth, better measures of well-being, higher levels of resilience, and more peaceful societies. More important, it provides a theory of social change and explains how societies change and evolve.

Humanity is facing a one-in-a-hundred-years pandemic, an event that has compounded existing socioeconomic challenges. Many of these problems, such as climate change, ever-decreasing biodiversity, depletion of the earth's freshwater, and overpopulation, are global. Such global challenges call for global solutions and require cooperation on a scale unprecedented in human history. In a hyperconnected world, the sources of many of these challenges, which span national borders, are multidimensional and increasingly complex. For this reason, finding solutions requires new ways of thinking.

Peace is the prerequisite for the survival of humanity in the twenty-first century. Without peace, it will not be possible to achieve the levels of trust, cooperation, and inclusiveness necessary to solve these challenges, let alone empower the international institutions and organizations necessary to address them. In the past, peace may have been the domain of the altruistic, but in the current century it is in everyone's self-interest.

Without an understanding of the factors that create and sustain peaceful societies, it will not be possible to develop the programs, create the policies, or understand the resources required to build peaceful and resilient societies. Positive Peace provides a framework to understand and to address the many complex challenges the world faces. Positive Peace is transformational in that it is a cross-cutting facilitator of progress, making it easier for businesses to sell, entrepreneurs and scientists to innovate, individuals to produce, and governments to effectively regulate.

In addition to the absence of violence, Positive Peace is also associated with many other social characteristics that are considered desirable, including stronger economic outcomes,

higher resilience, better measures of well-being, higher levels of inclusiveness, and more sustainable environmental performance.

Positive Peace research has found that, since 1960, countries with very high levels of peace, on average, achieved nearly three times higher GDP per capita growth compared with the least peaceful countries (Figure 5).[7] High Positive Peace nations record better outcomes in measures of environmental health, and countries that score well in criteria for environmental, social, and governance investment indicators tend to record stronger Positive Peace outcomes.[8]

Food security is strongly associated with socioeconomic resilience. The correlation coefficient between the Economist Intelligence Unit Food Security Index and the Positive Peace Index is high in absolute terms—at -0.91—showing that countries with low levels of Positive Peace have higher levels of food insecurity.[9]
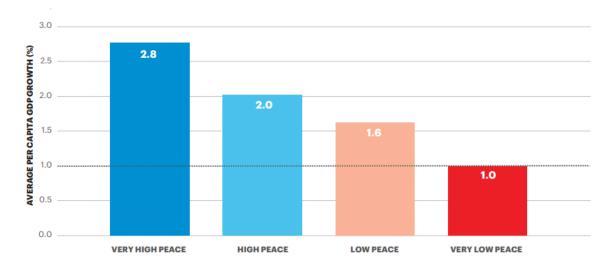

Figure 5. GDP growth by level of peacefulness, 1960–2016 (source: World Bank; IEP)

Positive Peace and Systems Thinking

Positive Peace is defined by IEP as the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. This concept is different from negative peace, which is the absence of violence or fear of violence.[10]

The GPI analyses data that measures levels of crime, military power, armed conflict, and other indicators. This is what is known as negative peace.

To measure Positive Peace, the factors that build cohesive, peaceful societies, a different approach is required. To construct the Positive Peace Index, IEP statistically compares nearly twenty-five thousand national data series, indices, and attitudinal surveys with the internal measures of the GPI to determine which factors had the highest statistical correlations. Indicators were then qualitatively assessed, and where multiple variables measured similar phenomena, the least significant were dropped. The remaining factors were clustered using statistical techniques into the eight pillars of Positive Peace. Three indicators were selected for each pillar, which represent distinct but complementary conceptual aspects.

What sets Positive Peace apart from other studies of peace is that its framework is empirically derived. The indicators chosen to measure each pillar are based on the factors that have the strongest statistically significant link with peacefulness, and as such form both a holistic and empirical framework.

The eight pillars of Positive Peace are well-functioning government; sound business environment; equitable distribution of resources; acceptance of the rights of others; good

relations with neighbors; free flow of information; high levels of human capital; and a low level of corruption. It is these same factors that create resilient and adaptive societies that can preempt conflict and help societies channel disagreements productively.
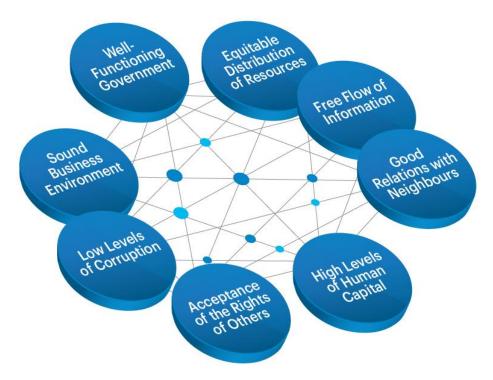

Figure 6. Eight Pillars of Positive Peace

Positive Peace is systemic and requires new thinking. Systems thinking originated in the study of organisms and is now used by sociologists. It can also assist in understanding the way countries and nations function and evolve. When combined with Positive Peace, systems thinking provides new ways of conceptualizing and explaining societal change. For example: A system is more than the sum of its parts and cannot be understood merely by breaking it down and analyzing its constituent parts. Positive Peace consists of eight pillars, but each of these pillars does not correlate with peace as strongly as the sum of all components, highlighting that the whole is more than its parts.

The concept of Positive Peace is in direct contrast to the notion of linear causality, which dominates decision making today and involves identifying a problem, detecting its cause, and tackling the root. Without a fuller understanding of underlying system dynamics, the linear approach creates unintended consequences. The failure to solve some of society's fundamental challenges is a testimony to the accuracy of this point. Systems thinking opens new ways of understanding nations and how they evolve. In systems, relationships and flows are more important than events. Events or problems represent the outcomes of the relationships and flows. This is why it is important to look at the multidimensional concept of Positive Peace as a holistic, systemic framework.

Positive Peace defines the goals toward which a system needs to evolve. Interventions should nudge the system toward higher levels of Positive Peace, rather than creating radical change, which runs the risk of ripping the fabric of society.

Conclusion

At the heart of a sustainable future is the recognition that we are part of a system, not independent of it. Without a clear understanding of the systemic nature of peace and the factors

that support it, it is impossible to determine what policies work best and what programs need to be implemented to support a more peaceful environment. Humanity needs new paradigms; the combination of Positive Peace and systems thinking provides a factual framework for us to apply to our shared global problems.

Positive Peace provides the optimal environment for human potential to flourish. IEP has found this to be true based on years of data collection and analysis through the GPI and Positive Peace reports.

Notes

[1] Steve Killelea, *Peace in the Age of Chaos: The Best Solution for a Sustainable Future* (Hardie Grants Books, 2020).

[2] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace in a Complex World," Sydney, June 2020, available from http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed January 13, 2021).

[3] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace," Sydney, September 2020, available from http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed January 13, 2021).

[4] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Positive Peace Report 2019: Analysing the Factors that Sustain Peace," Sydney, October 2019, available from http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed January 13, 2021).

[5] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace in a Complex World," Sydney, June 2020, available from http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed January 13, 2021).

[6] Institute for Economics & Peace, "COVID-19 and Peace," Sydney, June 2020, available from http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed January 13, 2021).

[7] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Business & Peace 2019: Analysing Peace as a Precondition for Sound Business Environment," Sydney, September 2019, available from http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed January 13, 2021).

[8] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Positive Peace Report 2019: Analysing the Factors that Sustain Peace," Sydney, October 2019, available from http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed January 13, 2021).

[9] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace," Sydney, September 2020, available from http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed January 13, 2021).

[10] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Positive Peace Report 2019: Analysing the Factors That Sustain Peace," Sydney, October 2019, available from http://visionofhumanity.org/reports (accessed January 13, 2021).