(Ir)Relevance of Peace? Reflecting Debates about Peace and Conflict in Forced Migration Studies

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In November 1981, nearly forty years ago, the United Nations General Assembly installed the International Day of Peace to remember and reinforce the ideal of peace and to relieve tensions and root causes of conflict. Later, it decided to devote September 21st of each year for the commemoration of and adherence to peace. On the occasion of the International Day of Peace in 2021 in this blog post I reflect on how peace and conflict are considered in Forced Migration Studies. Hereby, I draw on a recently published review of research debates. It shows that the literature available reflects to a large extent on how conflicts contribute to displacement, which risks of violence displaced people are affected by, and how they cope with respective dangers. However, peace is insufficiently attended to in studies about the conflict-displacement nexus, thus undermining displaced people's own perceptions of and practices for peace.

Globally, violent conflicts contribute to people fleeing their places of origin and seeking refuge elsewhere. Research in Forced Migration Studies, and in part also in Peace and Conflict Studies, has largely examined this relationship. But what are focus areas and main tendencies in research debates? And what role(s) does peace play in the nexus of violent conflict and displacement?

To answer these questions, Ulrike Krause and I carried out a semi-systematic review of the literature on conflict, displacement and peace published between 1980 and 2020 to identify and illuminate central research debates. We concentrated on monographs, journal articles, and contributions to edited volumes published in English. Hereby, we drew on JSTOR for our literature review as widely considered and most comprehensive literature search engine, especially in the Social Sciences. After applying specific combinations of search terms, we screened all 770 results we found and removed duplications as well as contributions with insufficient or no relevance for our topic of interest. Eventually, we arrived at 320 studies for our review. Given the fact that our systematic review did not reveal a number of contributions we consider highly relevant to our field of study due to recurring references and own research we conducted, we decided to add relevant literature based on our own research experience in the field. This procedure also helped us to address limitations regarding chosen time frame, literature database, language and our own positionality inherent in our systematic approach. Thus, we expanded our study to a semi-systematic review.

Three main tendencies in research debates

In the following, I focus on three main tendencies in research debates that we identified, and then reflect on the (ir)relevance of peace in the nexus of conflict and displacement.

The first main strand in debates we find concerns the conflict-displacement nexus, highlighting the multifaceted links of conflict and displacement. Conflict conditions contribute to various patterns of forced migration, e.g. rapid, recurrent and ongoing movements of people, mainly to neighbouring countries or regions. This observation is underlined by current examples compiled in UNHCR's 2020 Global Trends Report revealing that of some 6.7 million Syrian refugees worldwide, more than 80 per cent live in neighbouring countries. The same applies for Afghan refugees of whom 85 per cent sought refuge in

neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Similarly, refugees from South Sudan are in 95 per cent of all cases hosted in Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya.

In addition, conflicts affect displaced people's stays in host contexts. Continuous violent conflicts hinder people from returning and might also foster recurring movements. Such developments complicate the achievement of one of the three durable solutions to refugee situations promoted by the global refugee regime, especially voluntary repatriation to countries of origin, which is the preferred option among decision-makers, compared to local integration in host countries and resettlement to third countries. Moreover, long-lasting conflicts often lead to so-called protracted refugee situations, defined as a condition in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality live in exile for five or more years. Thus, at the end of 2020 UNHCR characterised the living situation of about 15.7 million people – that are 76 per cent of all refugees – as a protracted refugee situation.

Closely related to the structural links between conflict and displacement is the second main strand in research debates focusing on the various risks of violence displaced people are confronted with, hereby highlighting conflict-induced and gender-based risks of violence. As such, violence not only constitutes a cause of displacement but can continue during flight and in host environments leading some researchers to refer to a continuum of violence in this context. Especially ongoing risks in host situations of displaced people, such as military attacks on camps, camps as grounds for forced recruitment and as places of recreation for combatants have been emphasized in studies. Furthermore, the review reveals specific risks of violence based on gender. Whereas sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence and forced marriage, experienced by women and girls has been at the centre of research debates for many years, studies increasingly turn towards gender-specific violence faced by men and boys, such as forced recruitment by conflict parties.

Third, research on the conflict-displacement nexus takes agency and coping strategies of displaced people into consideration. Emphasis is placed on own strategies and activities to handle dangers and risks, thus turning away from portraying displaced people as passive victims. In the past, the literature has increasingly conceptualised flight itself as an active decision taken by people, for example Adhikari examines this aspect using a choice-based approach. Moreover, studies highlight displaced people's individual and collective practices to cope with their situations, especially in host environments. Research, for example, shows how displaced people form groups, get politically active, find support in faith to manoeuvre the variety of risks and uncertainties they are confronted with. In many instances these studies explore questions from a gender-specific perspectives.

What about peace?

The analysis of the literature illustrates that important findings have been generated on the connection between conflict and displacement. However, at the same time, our review also shows that peace has comparatively received very little scholarly attention in this context. If considered in studies around the nexus of conflict and displacement, peace is first mentioned as a necessary condition for displaced people's return to countries of origin. It thus constitutes a prerequisite for a durable solution to be achieved.

Second, peace is connected to peace(building) education for displaced people. Studies focus on the ways humanitarian actors teach displaced people on how to be 'peaceful', so that they are made aware, can return with respective skills and pose no further risks for the community around them.

Third, displaced people are regarded as potential destabilisers for peace and peacebuilding. Here, displaced people are not looked at as victims of violent conflict and displacement but as security risk causing tensions and instability in host environments. Displaced people's potential to endanger peace has been fed into debates around so-called "refugee warriors", a concept introduced by Zolberg and colleagues towards the end of the 1980s. It refers to displaced people organising themselves in groups to get actively involved in practices fighting, often with violent means, those responsible for continuous conflict in countries of origin and thus, preventing a return home. They can, however, also be part of conflict parties. Some studies ascribe to displaced people the responsibility for the spread of conflict and violence, associate

the distribution of weapons and fighters with their presence or attend to tensions between them and the host community.

Only very few studies are available exploring displaced people's own practices for peace. The edited volume "Refugees' Roles in Resolving Displacement and Building Peace: Beyond Beneficiaries" by Bradley, Milner and Peruniak is a noteworthy exception here. It seeks to explore displaced people's agency regarding peace and peacebuilding. Also Karbo's study on traditional approaches to peace in displacement contexts in Africa, Coffie's work on returnees in Liberia and the impact of higher education on peacebuilding as well as Janmyr's piece exploring the relationship between refugees and peace in international law represent first attempts to investigate how displaced people contribute to peace. On top of that, the research network Varieties of Peace seeks to uncover the various interpretations related to peace.

However, in general, we must conclude that peace constitutes a widely neglected research topic in Forced Migration Studies. Only very little is known about displaced people's understandings of and practices for peace. Such disregard is also evident in Peace and Conflict Studies. Although a considerable body of research on actors' contributions to peace processes has been published here, displaced people have not been sufficiently considered either.

Ways forward

Our semi-systematic review of research literature on conflict, displacement and peace has revealed that peace is barely attended to in Forced Migration Studies. Especially the meanings of peace for displaced people in exile as well as peace as a motive for their actions are largely unknown. This constitutes a wide research gap, particularly with regard to displaced people's manifold ties to conflict regions and their potential for contributing to the achievement of sustainable peace. Taking the literature review's findings into consideration, today's International Day of Peace thus reminds us of the indispensability of including displaced people into debates around peace and at the same time to consider peace as a central element in Forced Migration Studies.