

Building Peace: The Need to Understand, So We Can Act

Pax Forum
An International Internet-based Debate on
Peace Building
December 2001 – June 2002

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Pax Forum
Building Peace: To Understand, So We Can Act
Foreword

On September 11, 2001, we were brutally thrust into questioning the world in which we live. Fears and doubts suddenly rushed forth and forced us to consider issues that some of us thought we were only remotely concerned with: terrorism, international and geostrategic relations, the relationship between local situations and global imbalances, money laundering, our responsibilities as ordinary citizens, our possibilities for taking some kind of action in areas within our scope, and so on.

It was to provide a medium to express our dismay and our questions, as well as to step back and think about the importance and the means for building alternatives to violent conflict that the Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World <http://www.alliance21.org> offered to open an Internet-based discussion forum. In keeping with the Alliance's philosophy, rather than opting for an on-line Web-based forum—which requires sometimes difficult and costly Internet connections—the discussion was designed to rely exclusively on e-mail facilities, paving the way to a broader participation. Nonetheless, for safekeeping, all the information, the documents, and the archive of the contributions to the debate are published and can be accessed on the Web at <http://www.alliance21.org/forums/info/pax>.

Given the context and the general state of shock, the first phase of the forum consisted in allowing emotions and reactions to be expressed following the attacks. This was also designated as a time for the participants to introduce themselves to the assembly: in any meeting, it is of capital importance to know whom you are addressing, all the more so when such meetings are attended by people you can neither hear nor see. The introductions revealed a great diversity of participants (the number of which reached approximately 160 by the end of the debate), both in geographic and cultural terms, as well as from the standpoint of their fields of activity. Many Americans joined to exchange their thoughts and ideas with people in other parts of the world: having been the first victims of the attacks and the responsibility of world U.S. power having thus been hurled into the international spotlight, their active participation proved priceless in this dialogue of an emerging global society.

The debate, which was *moderated, structured, and translated* into three languages—English, French, and Spanish—discussed the following points successively:

- December 2001 – January 2002: Reactions to September 11th, reflection on the causes of violence, and participants' introductions.
- February: How are our relationship to the environment and the implementation of a truly sustainable development connected to peace building?
- March: What is the relationship between a socioeconomics of solidarity and peace?
- April: What type of governance, from the local to the global scales, do we need to strive for to secure lasting peace?
- May: How is peace related to education, values, art, and culture?
- June: This last period was devoted to our thoughts on the path we had traveled together during the previous six months.

Between each formal discussion theme, participants had a one-week “coffee break,” during which they were able to converse on an informal basis.

This agenda gave us a framework to consider peace in all of its facets: individual, collective, international, etc. It also allowed us all to question ourselves regarding our own responsibilities and our possibilities for acting for peace as ordinary citizens.

Summary of the Pax Forum Debates
Building Peace: To Understand, So We Can Act

Communication Is the First Step in the Art of Coexistence

The “Building Peace” Forum was initiated in December 2001. Given the psychological impact of the terrorist attacks on September 11th of that year and their aftermath, it seemed logical for its organizers to begin the discussion around an event that was directly related to peace and war. An introductory phase enabled many participants to introduce themselves before tackling the formal discussion that was to follow. The conversation on the September events allowed many participants to speak openly about something that many of us took to heart and that had left a great majority of us in shock. In a sense, this debate had a therapeutic dimension to it, as it allowed emotions to be expressed on a topic – peace – which, we all too often forget, cannot be confined to the narrow frontiers of pure rationality.

We were left wondering about the roots of violence

The reactions to the September events were almost unanimous in their condemnation of the attacks. One participant did admit to feeling some satisfaction when seeing that the “empire” had been hit and several voices were heard that judged U.S. policies themselves as generating some form of retaliation. Another participant, who had been an eyewitness to the attacks, gave a gripping first-hand account of that fateful day, reminding all of us that the consequences of such acts affect innocent individuals and not just responsible governments.

While everyone agreed that the killing of innocent people is a terrible thing, there were some who felt that one should not condemn terrorism outright. For one thing, many countries, including the U.S., enact policies that could qualify as policies of terror. Secondly, weak countries often do not have any other recourse against overwhelming power than means otherwise considered to be illegitimate. In essence, then, the discussion pointed from the start to an inescapable truth, namely, that the problem of peace and war is often more complex than meets the eye. Already, certain themes were raised that would be present throughout the discussion. One of these was the problem of inequality, including the gap between the North and the South, a problem that many saw as being at the root of violence. Another theme that would be debated in more detail was the inefficiency of governments to deal with the problem of violence and war. Generally, the issue of the root causes of violence was considered to be a fundamental one.

Humankind and the Biosphere

After this introductory session, we moved on to one of the four formal themes of the forum. From a practical standpoint, each theme was discussed during a three-week period, each followed by a one-week «coffee break,» which allowed for less formal interaction among participants. Generally, the third week of each debate proved the most active. The first theme dealt with “Humankind, the Biosphere, and Peace.” The general question put to the forum was the following: **What does the way in which we humans relate to our biosphere have to do with building lasting peace?** The three-week discussion logically took two lines, which ultimately joined one another. The first issue dealt with humankind’s relationship with the biosphere. The second issue tried to establish the link between that first topic and the building of a lasting peace.

Regarding humankind and the biosphere, it was generally agreed that we need to focus on this problem in a serious manner. For various reasons, energy seemed to be the running

theme of the discussion. The way in which the world has so far consistently wasted fossil fuels that are nonrenewable illustrates humanity's unhealthy relationship to the biosphere. The main culprit of this myopic vision has been caused in great part by the short-term gains sought by governments and companies big and small, in terms of both political and financial rewards. While we can pinpoint ignorance as a cause of this global disaster when we talk about the early stages of the industrial revolution, this is no longer the case today. Indeed, there are many environment-friendly energy sources—solar energy, wind, and water among them—which are well-known by energy experts but are still dramatically underutilized. Because large companies, including oil companies, are reluctant to look to other energy sources, and because the nature of governments, including in democracies, make them adverse to changing current policies, there has to be another engine for change.

Energy, for one, is a source of conflict

It is a well-known fact that the competition for natural resources, including energy and water, is a source of conflict, sometimes even violent conflict. In this perspective, the appetite of industrialized nations can often provoke conflicts in the developing world, as we have witnessed for example in Africa. Since the demand for natural resources is ever greater while supplies are dwindling, we may have reason for pessimism in the future. Will we only learn our lessons after some cataclysmic conflict? Or will we be able to control this fight for resources?

In the midst of this dire reality, many entertain hope; indeed, for some, there is no doubt that things will evolve for the better: through greater awareness, through global consciousness in environmental matters, sustainable development may indeed become a source for peace. If, as some suggest, we are on the brink of a *revolution of consciousness*, this might indicate that humanity may be about to take a great evolutionary leap forward. Since each of us longs in the end for universal peace, our collective consciousness might constitute our great hope for the future of humanity and the biosphere.

Even if sustainable development were fully embraced as a goal by the entire world, however, it might not eliminate the root causes of war. Still, it might achieve a greater degree of fairness in allowing access to basic resources for a decent life, which is an important end in itself and might reduce certain frictions that can translate into conflict.

Socioeconomy of Solidarity

From the biosphere, we then moved on to the issue of economics and society, more specifically, we asked the following question: **What is a “socioeconomy of solidarity” and what does it have to do with building peace?** Before giving an answer, participants felt that we first needed to identify the problem. Hence, several issues were raised. For instance: Would establishing a socioeconomy of solidarity promote peace? Are there really alternatives to the prevailing economic model? Is peace dependent on reducing inequalities at every level and on a more equitable economic system? What are the different things an ordinary person can do to foster a socioeconomy of solidarity? Is terrorism directly related to poverty? Do women have a particular role to play in local development?

From these fundamental questions, there also emerged three main definitions for a socioeconomy of solidarity. Some saw that such an economy is no longer separated from society and culture, and thus acts as a support structure for peace and sustainability. Others looked to socioeconomic solidarity as an alternative to “liberal” and “neo-liberal” economic conceptions, in other words, an alternative to a system of free-market trade, which causes poverty and consequently extinguishes the cultivation of peaceful societies. Finally, some saw the idea of a socioeconomy of solidarity as something that provides an alternative to corrupt governments and an alternative to the promotion of inequality at the state level.

Finding a balance between contradictory economic needs and differing cultural values

Most participants agreed that the clearest route to achieving socioeconomic solidarity and global economic impartiality, is the coexistence of fair justice and fair trade. The ingredients for a recipe such as this calls for participation, that of transnational organizations, state governments, nongovernmental organizations and, most certainly, civil society, individual citizens, and consumers. On the shoulders of the large organizations fall the responsibilities of creating the structure of fair-trade practices and facilitating its implementation. This framework would necessarily be established by creating a balance between effective economic policy and ethical trade practices. The supporting structure to this balance would be an incorporated equilibrium between contradictory economic needs and differing cultural value systems. Fair-trade practices would include accurate pricing and the availability of information on the reasons behind the prices established, thus enabling responsible, ethical consumerism.

Because the problem is a global one, it can be expected that effectuating change will require the involvement of various international bodies that possess the ability to act as catalysts. The use of transnational actors, such as the World Trade Organization, to implement and enforce an international legal system that adheres to the goals of fair trade and fair justice would be imperative to the success of such a striving endeavor. The role of nongovernmental organizations to ensure fair play, accurate representation, and impartial international investment would be an equally vital inclusion.

Governance

The third debate dealt with the issue of governance, a fairly recent concept, the definition of which does not have everyone's agreement, some preferring to use the generic notion of "government." Thus the general question we put to the forum was the following: **What is governance, what is our role in it, and how, exactly, does it relate to building peace?** We defined governance as a broad concept that takes into account and tries to explain the mutations of the international system, interdependence, the complex nature of the relations between the local and the global, and the multiplication of state and non-state actors. For the purpose of this discussion, we understood governance as a political and social regulation system that does not rely on governments alone.

The issue of government responsibility pervaded the whole debate on peace. After all, governments, in large part, hold the means and the power to use violence, and often have the resources to avoid it. Two main questions were raised regarding governments: legitimacy and capability. In effect, do governments have the legitimacy to make war and peace, and do they have the know-how? There seemed to be a general consensus that a legitimate government is, in essence, democratic.

Of course, this brings up the question: What is, in effect, a democratic government? Generally, it is one with high participation of both individuals and civil society. Essentially, in order for democracy to rid us of bad governance, today's form of democracy needs to be improved and reinforced where it has taken root; at the same time, it must gain new territories in order to fight half-democratic governments, wholly undemocratic governments, and non-state actors that garner power, but do not function democratically, including multinational corporations, some of which increasingly perform in a world where economic power is gaining ground relative to political power.

How to make everyone's interests prevail simultaneously

Then comes the issue of know-how. It seems clear to the naked eye that governments are, in large part, ineffectual when it comes to resolving conflicts. Although greater participation in decision making by citizens might bring about much needed common sense, this might not be enough. Indeed, as with young children, decision makers must also be educated in the art of making peace and resolving conflicts. Today, in addition to the problem of bad governance,

we must also deal with the issue of the ill-equipped structure of governance to meet the needs brought upon by globalization, i.e. the rigidity of national frontiers.

The construction of global economic and cultural communities has outpaced the construction of a global political community. To date, it seems that the global political community has developed around the core principle of strength, giving way to inequalities. We are lacking global democracy, but how can we generate one? Some suggested the idea of setting up a World Parliament, while others preferred to work with what already exists with the United Nations Organization. Many agree that such changes can be brought about most effectively via pressure from the global civil society, and possibly the organization of a large summit on global governance. The concept of *active subsidiarity* seemed to be an attractive alternative to traditional systems of governance. Active subsidiarity takes into account different scales of governance -, local, national, global – simultaneously, in order for everyone's interests to be taken into account without contradicting each other.

Culture, Values, Art, and Education

The final debate on culture, values, art, education, and peace concluded the formal discussion. The question raised was: **Art, Values, Culture, Education, and Peace Building: Are All These Related? How?** The vital role of education to the peace process echoed throughout this last discussion, as it had from the beginning of our forum. Many consider proper education as the key to the future of humankind, and our participants did not leave us wondering what constitutes the definition of “a proper education.” It should teach responsibility and critical thought; it should permit humankind to evolve and progress. In short, education should promote the values of a democratic society. Education for peace starts with children. Before school, it is families who have the primary role in instilling values of peace to small children. But schools also have to change in basic ways if we are to educate children so that they are *for* rather than *against* one another, so that they develop the ability to resolve their conflicts constructively rather than destructively and are prepared to live in a peaceful world.

Imagination, flexibility of mind, and openness constitute some of the qualities that need to be developed in individuals and which might enhance the creation of a real culture of peace. In essence, then, students should have the experience of working together cooperatively in a way that enables them to develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that foster effective interpersonal, intergroup, and international cooperation. They should learn how to turn conflicts into mutual problems to be resolved cooperatively. This would enable them to cooperate with others in resolving constructively the inevitable conflicts that will occur among and within nations, ethnic groups, communities, and families. Then, and only then perhaps, will these students develop into responsible adults capable of resolving conflict in a cogent, constructive, and imaginative fashion.

Culture plays a great role in our understanding of war and peace, and art defines our culture in many ways. Art interprets our thoughts and our experiences, collectively representing our world. Consequently, art is political. We know about art as an instrument of propaganda for war. However, art can also promote peace by serving as a vessel in pursuit of the truth. Other elements of culture play a role. Science, for instance, has enabled us to know our environment and, hence, to act to improve it. While it is true that many scientific discoveries have been made through the process of building weapons, the application of scientific findings have also modified our global environment both economically and socially, the Internet being only one example on a long list.

To be actively involved, daily, everywhere ...

A world that propagates a global culture of peace and tolerance of diversity is, in effect, one that generates a “universal culture.” Since, by default, a universal culture follows a set of “universal values,” it is ever more important to define, apply and assimilate these values. Where one speaks about universal values, one must speak about what it means to be a citizen

of the world. To be a citizen of the world means quite simply to be actively involved, daily and everywhere where one can act for the edification of the world, of a world where each and everyone knows and feels individually and socially responsible for others and contributes to the well-being of all in the unity that gathers and the diversity that enriches us.

It is undeniable that the establishment of a global culture of peace must foster greater cross-cultural contacts while developing ties between nations and peoples at many levels. This objective rejoins the idea of creating a global civil society that transcends national frontiers and enhances democratic values around the world.

Thus ended the formal discussion of the forum. To wrap up the discussion, the last month of the debate was devoted to an overall evaluation of the forum, by participants and organizers alike, an evaluation that allowed all of us to share our overall sentiments about the discussion and more generally about peace and ways to attain it.

Final Words

Two questions were posed to initiate this last conversation and allow people to reflect on the last few months : **How do you feel about the September 11 events and their aftermath now? Has this forum made any difference to you?** There were many responses. Some were very personal and even emotional. Several participants told us about the way in which the forum may have changed their lives a bit, perhaps by encouraging them to participate in other initiatives on peace, perhaps by pushing them to put together projects at the local level. The diversity of opinions and views was considered unanimously to have been a big bonus. Some participants looked to the future to envision what the next stage might be, in fact asking and responding to another fundamental question: What now? Generally, a majority of the contributors had a positive feeling about the forum.

Nevertheless, there were also a few participants who were more critical, arguing that the whole discussion lacked direction and that we may have tried to do too many things without accomplishing a lot. As if to respond to this criticism, several people proposed to launch some new initiatives, for instance the establishment of a free online access to a conflict-management and resolution-skills resource center, which would provide advice to people or groups facing conflict.

Peace education is at the top of the agenda

Others asked that this forum be used to launch other projects or to start petitions. There was a call to demand an Earth Charter at the upcoming Earth Summit. Someone suggested that we focus on certain themes debated during the forum, such as the prevention of conflict in Africa, going so far as to propose the creation of a permanent council on the **prevention of conflict in the 21st century**. All these ideas, and more, illustrate the fact that there is a need to get organized at the grassroots level, the only manner really to fill the wide gaps left open by inefficient and narrow-minded governments.

Generally, the need to improve the peace education of future generations seemed to be at the top of everyone's agenda, a feeling that illustrated what has to be the most important theme of the forum: education. All these ideas, and others, give us hope that the forum is perhaps but the start of various new projects that may help build a solid basis for a universal culture of peace.

Since the opening of the discussion, many ideas were brought to the fore, many questions were raised and many problems remained unresolved. Without bringing a definitive answer to the complex problem of peace, this forum showed that the will to find answers runs strong and that practical solutions do exist. As we are all too aware, in this day and age, good communication is fundamental if we want to build our future together and make it free of conflict.

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Useful Links on the Internet

The participants in the debate, with the wealth of their diversity, referred us throughout the discussion to a number of Web sites, to be consulted for further analysis, additional information, greater understanding, to expand the scope of our activities and networks.

To make such consultation easier, we put them together on the forum Web site at the following address:

http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/

The Web sites are classified according the forum's main discussion themes, each including a number of subsections. They are presented in alphabetical order with their link and a brief description in English, French, and Spanish, followed by links to the participants' message or messages in which they were mentioned. Some of the Web sites are listed under several different sections.

Classification of the Web sites:

– *Culture, Art, Education and Values*

International Charters

[http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture Education Media/charters.htm](http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture_Education_Media/charters.htm)

Think Tanks and Culture

[http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture Education Media/culture.htm](http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture_Education_Media/culture.htm)

Education

[http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture Education Media/education.htm](http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture_Education_Media/education.htm)

The Human Mind

[http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture Education Media/esprit.htm](http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture_Education_Media/esprit.htm)

The Media and Information Networks

[http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture Education Media/info.htm](http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture_Education_Media/info.htm)

Peace

[http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture Education Media/paz.htm](http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture_Education_Media/paz.htm)

– *Socioeconomics of Solidarity*

Companies

[http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Economy Society/companies.htm](http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Economy_Society/companies.htm)

Socioeconomics of Solidarity

[http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Economy Society/socioeco.htm](http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Economy_Society/socioeco.htm)

– *Governance*

International Charters

[http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture Education Media/charters.htm](http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture_Education_Media/charters.htm)

Democracy and Civil-society Networks

http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Governance/civil_society.htm

Governmental and Intergovernmental Institutions

http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Governance/government.htm

Human Rights and Humanitarian Movements

http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Governance/human.htm

Peace

http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture_Education_Media/paz.htm

– *Humanity and the Biosphere*

International Charters

http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Culture_Education_Media/charters.htm

Environment and Sustainable Development

http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Humanity_Biosphere/env_dev.htm

- *Participants' Personal Web Sites*

http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/links/Participants/personal.htm

We hope that the work accomplished here will help you to follow up in your search and research for peace.

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A Few Statistics

Number of participants at the opening of the forum: 100

Number of participants at the closing of the forum: 158

General profile of the participants:

1 organization, and 57 women and 100 men, 16 to 82 years old

ages 70-82: 3

in their 60s: 15

in their 50s: 23

in their 40s: 35

in their 30s: 33

in their 20s: 27

in their teens: 3

Languages in which participants expressed themselves:

English: 50

French: 56

Spanish: 52

Regions in which participants were living:

Africa and the Middle East: 20 participants

Asia: 14 participants

Europe: 69 participants

Latin America: 30 participants

U.S.A. and Canada: 21 participants

Number of countries of residence: 48

Number of nationalities represented: 55

(For details on the participants' countries of residence, nationalities, and fields of activity, please refer to the document "Who Are We?" at

http://www.alliance21.org/forums/d_read/pax/participants/en.htm)

Total number of messages between December 6 and June 30: 391

Introductions: 74

Contributions to the debate: 242

Messages from the Forum Coordination: 43

Monthly and weekly summaries: 27

Contributions by the School of Peace: 5

Number of contributors to the debate (in addition to their introduction): 67

→ (42.4% of the persons signed up actually contributed to the debate. This is a very high participation rate for a forum of this kind, for which a 30% participation rate is considered good)

Greatest number of contributions by a single participant: 29