What Would Peace look Like in Acapulco? The Views of Local Practitioners and Stakeholders

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Abstract
This article critically explores what peace means for 39 practitioners and stakeholders in the city of Acapulco, Mexico in 2021. Working in non-formal education, community development, the arts, and culturally based activities across the city, their responses provide unique insight into what peace might look like in a city with high levels of inequality, drug-related violence, and crime. Facilitating their vision of peace and getting participants to articulate what peace would look like for them, this article provides insights into practitioners’ views, changing the narrative from them being victims of violence to agents of positive social change. Peacebuilding literature frames the discussion, and the article concludes with lessons derived from the detailed analysis of participant views which might offer a pathway for others living and working in similar contexts.

Keywords
peacebuilding, local turn, Mexico, Acapulco, grassroot practitioners, peace, everyday peace

Introduction
This article is drawn from a larger piece of research conducted throughout 2020–2022 which sought to understand the role of informal education, culture, and arts-based interventions to address violence and conflict in Medellin, Colombia and Acapulco, Mexico. Whilst future publications will address cross cutting themes across the countries, this paper is drawn solely from the research conducted in Acapulco, discovering what peace would look like for the participants there.

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In Acapulco, 39 semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2021 with practitioners who worked in non-formal education, community development, arts, and culturally based activities, as well as policy holders and government officials exploring the central research question- What is the role of informal education, culture and the arts in peacebuilding? With a full analysis of these interviews, this article focuses on one of the questions: What would peace look like for you?

Whilst peace-building literature highlights the complexity of achieving a peaceful society, this paper provides a unique insight into the views of those who work in this context and analyses the various perspectives adopted. Initially, the paper begins with a broad literature review on peace and peacebuilding, followed by a brief contextualisation of Acapulco, the methodology, and the research findings. These findings are categorised into five overarching themes, some concentrating on micro level changes and others on structural, systemic societal changes. The first theme identified is individual and relationships, with a focus on the self and building cohesion within the family or neighbourhood to achieve peace. The second theme discusses the removal of violence and fear; the third attends to education and cultural activities; the fourth considers participation in decision making and the fifth centres on human rights, social justice and structural change. The paper concludes reiterating the importance of gaining local voices in understanding complex conflicts and valuing their insights into viable solutions to support everyday peace.

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**What is Peace and Peacebuilding?**

In 2017, a conservative estimation of the cost of violence for the global economy was $14.76 trillion in constant purchasing power parity or 12.4% of global gross domestic product (GDP), equaling $1,988 per person. This cost is based on economic impact of violence from 163 countries, with the cost of homicide and violent crime the highest proportion in South and Central America (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2018). This creates a threat to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its goals to end poverty, protect the planet, improve the lives of everyone, and strengthen peace. Serious concerns have been expressed about the level of fatalities in conflict, levels of military spending, terrorism and increased numbers of IDPs (Internally Displaced People) and refugees, with organised crime being identified as a significant stress factor related to all of these (World Bank, 2018). The importance of strategies that can ameliorate the impact of violent conflict on communities has never been more pressing.

A very early conception of peace developed by Galtung (1969) identified two typologies: ‘Negative peace’ and ‘Positive peace’. He regarded the former as the absence of violence and war, and the latter as the integration of human society. Whilst, as is discussed below, others have developed a more multidimensional approach to peace and argue it cannot be dichotomised so neatly; many still use this straightforward framework when reviewing policy approaches or in their personal articulation of what peace might be.

Peacebuilding may simplistically be seen as creating an alternative to war and violent conflict; however, it is more complex and multidimensional in character (Keating & Knight, 2004). John
Paul Lederach (1997) emphasises the importance of local ownership and agency in any peacebuilding process. He argued for a holistic approach to peacebuilding asserting the importance of participation and coordination between various sectors in contested societies. Conflict and peacebuilding are protracted, non-linear and require long-term commitment. Lederach (2003) identifies four ‘change goals’ - personal, relational, structural and cultural - cautioning against over reliance on state-sponsored peacebuilding processes. In contrast, relationships made up of individual people, their networks, organisations and institutions which build social and community life provide a more nuanced understanding of peace (Lederach, 2001). Once the conflicted system is identified, the search for a peacebuilding infrastructure oriented toward supporting social change dynamics is required (Lederach, 1997).

In 2004, the Utstein Report (Smith, 2004) designed a palette of potential peacebuilding approaches. It proposed a four-pillar approach (U4) including security, political framework, reconciliation and justice and socio-economic foundation. It acknowledged the importance of specific conflict context, as will be discussed below in relation to Acapulco. Smith (2004) refers to the activities of peacebuilding as a palette rather than a toolbox because the activities are best mixed together according to the circumstances (Smith, 2004, 27). Therefore, understanding various perspectives on what peace would look like, from a variety of participants, provides the colours required in creating the palette of peacebuilding as is provided in the below findings section. Establishing grassroots and ‘bottom-up’ perceptions of peace is crucial in establishing differing perspectives and changing relationships, cultures and narratives.

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The ‘Local Turn’ in Peacebuilding

While the need to include local community actors voice in peacebuilding is not a new phenomenon (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015; MacGinty & Richmond, 2013), there is an increasing body of work on the ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding. This focuses on the need for local actors to explore their understanding, meaning and solutions to conflict and violence in the process of peacebuilding. It rejects top-down approaches and often illuminates the short-term nature of international interventions that fail to engage with local actors. As MacGinty and Richmond (2013, 770) note,

The local turn effectively allows for the reconstruction of emancipation, via the everyday, in an empathetic frame (solidarity), in which subjects have agency (meaning we are all subjects). Structural obstacles to peace can be better redressed, although this may demand radical solutions.

Similarly, Maschietto et al. (2022) argue, there is a need to understand local subjectivities of peace and violence. By understanding the grassroots, local perceptions, perspectives and challenges with peace and violence, localised solutions can be facilitated and advocated for (Eversley et al., 2022). Whilst this article focusses specifically on what peace would look like, the importance of understanding local experiences and how they perceive both peace and violence is important in broader peacebuilding work.

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Grassroots Peacebuilding

Whilst Peacebuilding includes addressing and eradicating the causes of structural and social violence (UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund), 2011), it also aims to develop sustainable and positive peace, focusing on social participation, ownership, and local knowledge (UNICEF, 2011). O’Prey (2022, 174), a community activist, discusses her work in Northern Ireland, noting that despite both overt conflict and peace process phases during the political violence, there was always time for

‘…community-based activism that addresses community need and participation, social justice, economic, equality and human rights issues, and legacy issues as well as locating them within a peacebuilding framework.’

Bizberg (2015) discusses social movements in Mexico and the grassroots demand for rights: human rights, right to know how relatives were killed and the right to justice. Peacebuilding, as a process, is a dynamic transformation of crucial relationships within communities (Skarlato et al., 2013a). There is evidence of the positive influence of this transformation on social cohesion and active citizenship (Akar, 2016), as well as the inclusion of groups in finding tangible alternatives to conflict, especially through spaces of informal participation (Pepper, 2018). Barsoum et al. (2019, 27) argue that,

‘…connecting all tracks in an inclusive process offers the greatest potential for a transformation towards sustainable peace. Peace support actors engaged in process design thus aim to establish processes that actively include not only the elite but also the broader public down to the grassroots. Inclusive processes not only bring parties closer to an agreement but also help prevent and address deadlocks, since public opinion is often a contributory factor to stalling processes. On the other hand, public opinions and perceptions of the negotiations can give the conflict parties the necessary impetus to move the peace process forward.’

Therefore, gaining the insights of grassroots activists as to how they envisage peace is vital to begin the conflict transformation process.

Informal Education and Peacebuilding

The role of education has often been articulated as supporting the process of peacebuilding specifically in Mexico (Franco, 2009) and further afield. For Catzoli-Robles (2016) peace education is seen as an ethical obligation and a social necessity in Latin American teaching. Peace education has been defined as a

‘process of acquiring the values and knowledge and developing the attitudes, skills and behaviour to live in harmony with oneself, with others, and with the natural environment. It aims to reduce violence, support the transformation of conflicts, and advance the peace capabilities of individuals, groups, societies and institutions’ (Jäger, 2019, 49).

Peace education can also focus on protecting groups from the negative impacts of violence; including children (UNICEF, 2011), women (Pepper, 2018), and minority groups (Skarlato et al., 2013b). Peace education can take place in formal, informal or in everyday settings. Fundamentally, peace education provides spaces (Jäger, 2019) where people can collectively explore, and learn from, their experiences of conflict, violence and peace.
The development of tools and techniques to examine the knowledge and concerns of local groups and communities has been an essential feature of public policy development (UNICEF, 2011). Educational processes can help people explore the views and experiences of those living in conflict as well as transfer knowledge gained from other contexts (UNICEF, 2011). Informal and nonformal education can complement formal education whilst working with a wider cross-section of society. Nonformal learning is generally programme based, whereas informal learning can occur in any context and does not necessarily have to follow a specific programme of study. According to UNESCO, nonformal education is: ‘...often provided to guarantee the right of access to education for all [...] Nonformal education can cover programmes contributing to adult and youth literacy and education for out-of-school children, as well as programmes on life skills, work skills, and social or cultural development’ (UNESCO, 2011). This research sought to analyse the educational and cultural programmes in Acapulco and their impact on peacebuilding as opposed to focusing on formal educational approaches.

The literature shows there has been a diverse use of nonformal education programmes to tackle the causes and effects of violence. These are based on the local need, demand and context of the community and conflict. From heritage centres to specific groups for victims of violence to literacy and conflict resolution programmes for young people or self-therapy groups, Hoppers (2006) classifies these types of programmes depending on their function. The first categorisation is para-formal education, this type of education consists of actions connected to the formal system, sometimes subsidised by authorities. The second is popular education; these programs are usually to support communities who face multiple levels of deprivation to develop critical awareness and increase participation. The third merges literacy with skill development programmes. This approach aims to include literacy and skills training to offer education for work and personal growth. A fourth categorisation covers professional and vocational training; it targets employability skills over a series of activities and courses to get national certificates. A fifth considers personal development, with programmes designed for activities and hobbies for individual growth. Nonformal education is the sixth category, with programmes targeting groups in disadvantaged situations where there is violence, marginalisation, and displacement. The final category highlights activities of pre-schooling and education, these programs are developed within the community or home-based to support child development. This study included a range of community-based programmes working to address conflict and violence experienced by local communities in Acapulco.

**Culture and Arts in Peacebuilding**

Whilst many authors (Hunter & Cohen, 2019; Shank & Schirch, 2008; Tovar, 2015) have recognised the value of arts-based approaches in peacebuilding, others have noted the lack of recognition afforded to these approaches at policy or strategy levels (Hunter & Page, 2014). However, a focus on cultural and arts-based practices can promote values of solidarity, respect, and justice through recognition and acknowledgement of principles and ideals rooted in the cultural landscape (Mwikisa & Dikobe, 2009). Moreover, artistic engagement has been deemed to facilitate ‘transformative learning and the development of skills and capacities for more constructive engagement with conflict’ (Bang, 2016, 355). Osei-Hwedie and Abu-Nimer (2009) found that understanding cultural traits can support conflict resolution and peacebuilding and they argue for the need to review cultural traits from the community context as opposed to imposing hierarchical, institutional narratives. However, despite the acknowledgement of the need to engage local communities and the positive, transformational potential of the arts in peacebuilding, there is a dearth of literature on how informal educators and artists articulate and envision peace; this article seeks to begin to fill that void.
Brief Context: The Case of Acapulco

Acapulco is located in the state of Guerrero, a state with a historical reputation for poverty and violence. A sharp increase in violence in Acapulco began in 2006 when President Calderón declared a ‘war on drugs’ after he took office. Calderón, with the support of the United States (Sullivan & Beittel, 2009), militarised the war deploying the military in domestic law enforcement (Rodrigues et al., 2017). Violence between drug gangs, involvement of national cartels, extortion of small businesses and conflict with state forces resulted in a huge increase of violence on the streets of Acapulco. Drug related killings increased dramatically as did the brutality of the deaths (Gonzales, 2012). Whilst subsequent governments have attempted to move away from the narrative of war on drugs to more social reform, urban violence is still acute in the state of Guerreo. In 2022 Acapulco had the second most murders in the world with 110.5 per 100,000 inhabitants (Statista, 2022) and in the first 6 months of 2017 alone, there were 12,155 murders in Acapulco (Partlow, 2017). The violence in the state has generated displacement of the population with a resulting rupture of families and communities, abandonment of labour, cultural uprooting and negatively impacting community identities. Violence against women is endemic, with nearly 25% of deaths in 2015 being female. In Acapulco, 46% of deaths were among young people between 15 - 29 years of age (Solano, 2014).

On June 6, 2021, mid-term elections were held in Acapulco. During this, many violent incidents took place with 782 formally registered against candidates, 34 candidates forced to step down by threats from criminal groups, and 89 candidates and politicians assassinated (Etellekt, 2021). Rodrigues et al. (2017, 627) suggest ‘otherness’, its place in the political economy, drug trafficking and urban militarisation make Acapulco an important site in comprehending the “militarisation of the campaign against drug trafficking in urban spaces”. The melting pot of issues facing Acapulco, the rise of authoritarian governments and death being analysed as a profitable business, (Valencia, 2018) make it of paramount importance to gain the voices of practitioners striving to address the violence and their views on what peace would look like for them.

Methodology

We conducted 39 semi-structured interviews, 26 of which were online during lockdown 2021 and 13 of which were face to face following local health regulations and social distancing guidelines. Participants, 16 females and 23 males, were selected from three main groups who were all involved in peacebuilding activities: local government (13) and private initiatives (5) and civil society and community-based organisations (21) which had been or were at the time involved in cultural and non-formal education activities related to peacebuilding. Whilst analytical themes were drawn from all data collected, direct quotations have only been used from 18 participants given they were the most relevant to exemplify the themes identified.

Ethics was granted from University of Glasgow in 2020 and all ethical procedures and processes were completed. All participants were given a plain language form providing information on the study. All participants were emailed or provided a hard copy of a consent form to sign, and interviews were conducted by four Spanish speaking researchers on the larger project. Participants were recruited through a snowballing approach, with research partners in Acapulco having knowledge of initial contacts working in the area and then asking if there were other practitioners who should be contacted. Having locally based researchers in Acapulco conduct the interviews helped facilitate rapport building with participants. All researchers involved in this project have experience of working with marginalised communities in a variety of settings. They were therefore acutely aware of the potential sensitivities in discussing topics on conflict, violence and peacebuilding. All participants were informed they could
stop the interview, be removed from the research at any time and interviewees had access to relevant agencies that could be signposted if the interviewee became upset or needed additional support given the content of discussions. This did not happen, and all participants were willing to continue to be involved and participate fully in the semi-structured interviews. These interviews included the question: What would peace look like for you? A thematic analysis of the data obtained from this question resulted in the identification of five main themes that can be placed on a continuum from individual to structural level changes required to envisage a peaceful society.

Findings

‘Acapulco at peace is when you don’t think, at some point, you will have to migrate’.

This powerful statement came from a community practitioner who saw peace in Acapulco as a place people wanted to be, where they wanted to stay and not be forced to leave. Participants articulated a range of different ways required to achieve this. Rarely did a participant speak solely about one approach to achieving peace. For analytical purposes, we have categorised the approaches into five overarching themes, on a continuum from micro to macro strategies. The first theme to be analysed is the individual and relationships. This focuses on the self and the building of cohesion with those within the family or neighbourhood. The second theme was about the removal of violence and fear for the individual and communities. For these people they analysed peace as the absence of direct violence or fear of violence. The third theme was focussed on education and cultural activities in striving for a more peaceful society and the fourth was on participation in decision making. The last theme was multifaceted with an articulation of the need for peace centred on human rights and social justice. It was also about structural change, with more equitable distribution of resources in striving to eradicate poverty and the perceived direct impact this would have on creating a more peaceful society.

The Individual and Community Relations

For many participants there was an individual aspect to the building of peace which then fed into the community and more structural level changes. One participant who worked in a Church-based organisation, felt the need for personal well-being, and that ‘starting with oneself will generate peace in the family or the community’. They continued,

‘…we do not think that peace will come from the Government, from the world, from above, it can contribute, but rather for us, peace is built from below, from each person of each family, from each community and not that it comes as a decree…’ (Church-based organisation, M).

Lederach (1997) highlighted the importance of personal change, where individuals use their relationships and agency to build community, thus collectively working towards social change. Indeed, this focus on the ‘local turn’ (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013), ensuring peace is built from the community up was a common theme among interviewees, with at least 10 participants noting its significance. One artist working for a local charity simply noted,

‘…I believe that peace begins with yourself and with those around you, your neighbours…’ (Community Artist, F)

She felt that being at peace and being happy in yourself would have an impact on neighbours and the broader community. This narrative of building positive connections and relationships with neighbours
or the community came through strongly. Another community-based worker replied: ‘Oh peacebuilding, I think of public spaces, I think of coexistence of neighbours, that’s what I think.’ Another participant who worked with children and young people articulated this in more theoretical terms, explicitly discussing social capital (Putnam, 2000):

‘I think that peace is definitely if the absence of violence, but also the construction of positive relationships, a better distribution of resources, that there is this flow between all sectors, with all people, like the construction of social capital; I think this concept is to be built with the community and I think Acapulco can achieve it.’ (Children’s educational organisation, F)

Others also alluded to key concepts related to the social capital of trust and reciprocity,

‘I would see an Acapulco in peace, one that any society yearns, desires, very low security indexes, with confidence, a very strong trust among the society, between neighbours, a trust also between society and government, that is very important, to be able to generate that issue, that strength of the community and build peace.’ (Private Initiative, M)

Whilst both these participants mentioned community-based relationships and trust, they have also noted the need for engagement with the government and better distribution of resources, themes we will return to below. Another participant, in a similar vein, discussed respect, noting,

‘For me this means talking about peace, respecting the thinking of the person in front of me, respecting their views and in the end if I respect, they will respect me too.’ (Rotary Club, F)

These views align with the findings of Skarlato et al. (2013a) where relationships within the community are vital. The participants’ conceptions of what peace would be for them are very localised and based on trust, respect, and positive relationships. Cox (2009) notes that whilst social capital has long been of interest to social scientists, increasing work on the interconnections between this concept and violence reveals a useful lens to assist or prevent post-conflict community building. For policy makers and practitioners this demonstrates the importance of connecting people in positive ways, as well as the importance of localised community building as an initial step in peacebuilding endeavours. Indeed, many local community-based practitioners who work in areas of conflict highlight the importance of building rapport and trust in establishing positive working relationships to address conflict at a local level (See for Example Eversley et al., 2022).

**Removal of Violence**

To build strong connections, respect and trust there is the need to eradicate the fear people feel on a day-to-day basis. For the participant working with the Children’s Educational Organisation, noted above, peace is understood simplistically, as the absence of violence. Others reflected a similar understanding, articulating the removal of violence and the fear of going out at night as evidence of peace:

‘Peace is, I believe, the tranquillity of people, it is that people feel safe, that you are not afraid to walk at 10 o’clock at night through your area, not to feel insecurity. I believe that is the peace.’ (Local Government Worker, M)
Others also reminisced about times when they felt safe to walk the streets in Acapulco:

‘I remember Acapulco, in its heyday… I could go out late at night, you could be in the early morning walking along the coast or anywhere in Acapulco and you could not hear the violence we are talking about now… because day by day we live in uncertainty in Acapulco.’ (Community Artist, F)

The everyday fear was reiterated throughout interviews, with many participants worrying that something violent could happen at any time:

‘I visualize [peace] without that fear of leaving here, because it is the daily fear that they go out to do their activities and can return safe and sound in your house, without thinking that something can happen to you on the way, or without being careful of not falling into a situation in which nobody would like to be in.’ (Community Organisation, M)

This constant sense of fear, uncertainty and being on high level alert of getting caught in violent activities, underpinned a large number of the participants’ reflections on peace. Magaloni et al. (2020) found that many citizens in Mexico live in fear mainly due to the activities of drug trafficking organisations. However, Berents and ten Have (2017), note that whilst violence and insecurity can become the central narrative of communities, there are nuances to this narrative, with people in these contexts navigating everyday lives to establish positive communal experiences. Whilst fear of violence is discussed here, participants also talked about positive activities of building education and cultural opportunities for communities.

**Education and Cultural Activities**

The next quote, from a participant who works in a private initiative, notes the importance of both informal and formal education.

‘…one of the key axes for the promotion, for the construction of peace, is education, formal and informal, because this generates the mechanisms, lays the foundations for the integral formation of children, of young people…’ (Private Initiative, M)

The participant below also values informal education, arguing that for progression in school there is an expectation of formal qualifications (in this instance the primary certificate) but when this has not been achieved, it becomes a block for further education. For many young people from marginalised and disenfranchised communities this is a barrier to participation and therefore, coinciding with Pepper’s (2018) findings, this local government official describes the need to have more informal spaces and less barriers to education.

‘…increase the educational offer in the informal sector, because it does not exist… the secretary of labour told us, that they [young people] have to have a minimum of a primary certificate, I could tell you that 80% did not have that. If we put those barriers up then you cannot access a quality education.’ (Local Government Worker, F)

This Community Artist (M) views informal education as a mean to create cultural spaces and challenge the deficit narrative that Acapulco is solely about violence:

‘… we try to start generating another vision of their environment, an environment in which there are cultural events, an environment in which, a few years ago there were no cultural spaces or artistic expressions, and we try to put that grain of sand, that people know that Acapulco is more than that [violence]. There was a point in which it was believed that it was only violence, but we said - in Acapulco there is also culture…’

Changing the narrative, becoming agents for social change (Beck & Purcell, 2020) and envisioning Acapulco in a different way, was important for this participant. However, to achieve this, he is clear
that there needs to be cooperation between citizens and the government. This is a further theme that was articulated multiple times, with participants noting the importance of participation in decision making.

**Participation in Decision Making**

It is crucial that participation in decision making is not tokenistic and that decisions are arrived at once citizens have been listened to and meaningful dialogue with government has taken place. As Arnstein (1969, 216) argues, ‘There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process.’ As this practitioner, who works in a gender-based charity (F) notes:

‘I imagine from the outset with a committed Government, a government that proposes the recognition of citizens’ rights, not only because the law says so but that generates spaces for participation where the voice of citizens is listened to, that is the first element, authorities who are open to dialogue, to criticism, to the observations, that seems to me to be a fundamental element [of peace].’

Another participant agrees, seeing peace as

‘…citizen participation, in addition to this society-government issue, active participation, proactive participation of society in the identification of problems and their solutions through dialogue, through institutional channels to generate or trigger processes, to trigger actions in the community that are seen as an action, a peaceful reaction of the people for the solution of common problems.’ (Private Organisation, M)

The need for community members to be engaged in decision making and active citizenship (Akar, 2016) is deemed crucial for sustainable peace (Eversley et al., 2022). The United Nations in their 2030 sustainable goals agenda argue that in order to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and to provide accountable and inclusive institutions, there is a need to ‘Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels’ (https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda). This includes decision making about budgets and spending.

The need for communities to be involved in public policy creation as well as the planning and implementing the spend of monies is seen as transformational for this community artist (M).

‘I imagine it, a peacebuilding plan, creating a local public policy from the local, from their own communities, from the needs and interests of their own communities. Not to propose a public policy from political ambition; a public policy is therefore public, it must meet the immediate, direct needs of the community, which understands the city.’

The design and resourcing of public policy from communities’ chimes with models of participatory budgeting. Social movements in Brazil are heralded as inventing participatory budgeting (Goldfrank, 2012) and some countries, such as Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021), have committed to it as part of community empowerment and participatory democracy. There is currently no national regulation for participatory budgeting in Mexico (https://www.pbatlas.net/mexico.html) and Díaz-Cayeros (2019) notes that despite relatively large social expenditure transfer for education, health and social welfare, fiscal federalism in Mexico is not particularly redistributive with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021) finding early consultation in regulation making processes are not systematic and trust in public institutions is relatively low.

A more transparent and inclusive style of governance can successfully, though not unproblematically, support post-conflict countries such as in El Salvador (Bland, 2011). In Acapulco, practitioners wished for transparency and inclusivity as a means to engage community voice effectively and to challenge
corruption, violence and inequality. This participant clearly summarises these sentiments and their vision leads to the following theme of rights, justice and structural change:

‘Peace as I see it has a fairer and more equitable economic scenario for all the sectors that live in the city, there has to be a satisfaction of the most basic needs…it has to do, definitively with the participation of people in various issues, in the streets, in organizations, it has to do with a cultural change with a new way of seeing, understanding, the world.’ (Creative Community Organisation, M)

Rights, Justice and Structural Change

This theme clearly aligns with notions of distribution of resources linked to human rights, social justice and structural change. For these participants, despite working in different areas of practice, viewing peace through a human rights perspective was considered fundamental:

‘…peace is to be seen from the perspective of human rights, when we can all have access to all rights, we will have the necessary conditions for peace.’ (Church Based Organisation, M)

‘I also can’t imagine that [peace] in a place where there is this level of deprivation and these degrees of inequality. So, if I see a place at peace, it’s a place with more or less uniform human development, a certain kind of access to rights, that’s what I imagine.’ (Local Government Official, F)

For this participant who works in an arts-based organisation tackling various forms of violence, peace is viewed through a social justice lens, and this entails the need for the eradication of poverty:

‘I imagine an Acapulco to begin with in terms of social justice…I imagine a place without so much poverty, I don’t know if you know, that we are first place in urban poverty; and, obviously, a place without everything that has happened, a quiet place, a beautiful place in every way.’ (Arts-based organisation, F)

The eradication of poverty through economic redistribution and investment came through strongly in addressing the violence and creating a more peaceful society, sometimes as the only means of getting ‘out of the hole’:

‘In light of the pandemic, only if there is a substantial economic investment will Acapulco be able to get out of the hole it is in, the hole that feeds the problems of violence that exist.’ (Private Initiative, M)

The creation of employment was clearly articulated as a means of eradicating poverty and preventing people from engaging in violence:

‘I imagine a prosperous Acapulco, an Acapulco with sources of employment, an Acapulco with investment in infrastructure towards the main industry, one that sustains not only Acapulco but the entire state of Guerrero. Then I imagine an Acapulco with an invigorating industry, with infrastructure renovation, with new models, with Acapulco that knows how to capitalize on its power of natural beauties, its power to be in the collective memories of nostalgia and sell it, and an Acapulco that looks to the future. Not an Acapulco where people cannot go out at night without problems, because life at night is fundamental for this city, that can continue to throw parties…then I imagine an Acapulco not only with a strong tourism industry but with other industries or in other sectors and in this utopian city with a cultural and artistic scene which is also solid.’ (Cultural Promoter in Charity Organisation, M)

As can be extrapolated from these quotations, for many participants there is a connection between viewing peace through a rights and justice-based lens alongside the eradication of poverty and creation
of employment and sustainable industry. Acapulco has relied heavily on the tourist industry for decades, but for this participant there needs to be diversification of opportunities, alongside ensuring people feel safe to achieve a more peaceful society. Whilst these participants are working with local communities to facilitate ‘everyday peace’ they felt to create sustainable peace there was a need to address broader issues, such as poverty, at a structural level and through meaningful participatory democracy.

**Conclusion**

This article sought to examine how practitioners from grassroots organisations, as well as policy makers, envision a peaceful Acapulco. Their replies to the question of what peace would look like for them, as people who live and work in the context of conflict, striving to contribute to positive social change, increases our understanding of the realities, complexities, and ambitions for the city. Their views demonstrate the multi-faceted dynamics that become apparent when discussing both conflict and peace and reveal that one singular approach to peacebuilding is not beneficial nor sustainable. All participants discussed multiple, intertwining needs and approaches in the attempt to realise their visions of a more peaceful Acapulco. A central contribution from this paper was the identification of the five broad themes of peace from participants. For some, the focus was predominantly on the individual and the relationships created, in building cohesion with others and creating safe localised environments for community members. For others, a somewhat simplistic yet vital conception of peace, was the removal of fear and violence. How to achieve this, of course, is the challenge. Some participants advocated for educational and cultural activities as a means of discussing challenging issues, garnering perspectives across different groups and advocating for a more peaceful society. Some participants clearly felt the need to be engaged in decision making, policy creation, budgeting and politics as a means of providing space for marginalised voices. Finally, participants discussed broader structural issues that centred on human rights and social justice, arguing that having a more equitable society would provide alternative opportunities for those who become involved in violence, as well as for the victims of violence.

As this article has highlighted, in order to arrive at a more peaceful society, practitioners and policy makers need to be aware of the multiple levels of inequality and facilitate consciousness raising. The language of possibility and a belief in personal and collective power can gradually begin to move people forward on the continuum towards a more peaceful and just society. It is vital that informal educators are working with those who are experiencing the hardest times in society so that their voices are being heard in decision making and through the collective pursuit of solutions. Their voice is a central contribution to this paper and would be beneficial for anyone trying to understand the complexities of violence, gang warfare and conflict in any context.

**All participants discussed multiple, intertwining needs and approaches in the attempt to realise their visions of a more peaceful Acapulco.**

Finding out where people want to be, even if it means acknowledging that it may be somewhat far removed from the present reality, can help practitioners and communities to consider how they might slowly work towards a more peaceful society. Work on individual and community relations, as well as providing tangible and meaningful opportunities for those who bear the brunt of violence or who are engaged in it, is crucial. It can also help policy makers to work together with practitioners and communities towards locally sourced solutions that can hopefully ensure that less people live with the fear of having to migrate to fulfil a peaceful life.
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