

## Navigating Urban Complexities through Peace and Sustainability

Insights from the Hiroshima University Peace Study Tour 2023



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In August 2023, a diverse cohort of 26 students from across the globe converged for the inaugural Hiroshima University Peace Study Tour, a collaborative effort by Columbia University, Hiroshima University, and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. The tour was held as part of a series of events to commemorate the anniversary of Hiroshima University. Over a span of nine rigorous but enriching days, the tour explored the drivers of conflict and cooperation between the public sector, private sector, and local communities with respect to stewardship and dependence on natural resources.

Specifically, the focus was on the interlinkages between SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities), SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

**The complexity of urbanization, viewed as a wicked system, reflects our world's biggest challenges.**

Through varied content and locations, two key concepts were introduced and explored: the pillars of positive peace (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2022a) and wicked systems (Rittel and Webber, 1973). The former includes effective, sound, and just governance, business environment, resource allocation, flow of information, with strong human capital and low levels of corruption. The latter involves complex, evolving, and unpredictable

problems that require multiple stakeholders to define and solve.

Following a week of theoretical sessions and real-life illustrations, the tour culminated with group presentations connecting the SDGs. Our group scrutinized the nexus between SDGs 11 and 16, a critical focus as rapid urbanization is expected to continue, with over 70% of the world's population projected to live in cities by 2050 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2022b).

Connected to these issues, our inquiry delved into several case studies. These included Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, where these trends have led to insufficient housing, unemployment, inequality, and waste management issues; the Philippines, where urbanization combined with weak local governance has heightened disaster risks (Garschagen et al., 2015); and Brazil, where the socioeconomic inequalities that characterize some working-class neighbourhoods (favelas) fuelled civil unrest and other security issues, such as drug-related violence and associated police interventions (all examples of wicked systems). Interestingly, a silver lining emerged in our inquiry: Afghanistan, where the government relied on a culture of kinship and mutual support to implement community action plans

at the local level to tackle rapid urbanization post-2001 defeat of the Taliban regime to improve collective solidarity and stimulate the local economy (French et al., 2019).

The movement of people to urban areas offers significant benefits for individuals (via jobs and education), businesses (lower costs, access to talent), societies (diverse populations), and governments (lower service delivery costs, ease of accessibility). To fully access the benefits of urban life, multiple challenges need to be confronted. These include the availability of adequate housing, infrastructure (SDG Target 11.1), transport (Target 11.2) and employment, high levels of pollution and environmental degradation (Target 11.6/11.b) and socio-economic inequalities (Target 11.5). Addressing the challenges driven by rapid urbanization also requires focusing on critical targets in SDG 16: the development of transparent and accountable institutions (Target 16.6), participatory decision-making (Target 16.7), reduction of violence and the exploitation of children (Target 16.1/16.2).

Our presentation concluded with policy recommendations articulated around four main themes intersecting with the pillars of positive peace. The first theme underscored the imperative of establishing robust governance frameworks that are instrumental in sustainably bolstering urban infrastructure while simultaneously fostering rural advancement. Urban strategies prioritize the development of suitable legislative and financial mechanisms to champion affordable housing, accessible transportation, and the transition to renewable energy sources, while rural strategies aim to deter urban migration by elevating living conditions and expanding opportunities in non-urban areas.

The second theme centered on fostering a conducive environment for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This environment can be realized through increased dialogue between public and private sectors, streamlined access to financing sources, and reduced dependence on the public sector and international aid.




Participants of the Peace Study Tour in Miyajima Island, Hiroshima, Japan. Photo from the organizers.

The third theme leveraged the opportunity derived from improved technological capabilities, specifically, artificial intelligence, in gathering and analyzing big data that can vastly improve the provision of key services like transportation, employment, and energy. However, these strategies need to be carried out in a robust and secure manner.

Our final thematic recommendation emphasized the importance of raising consciousness and fostering skills pertinent to disaster relief and mitigation through top-down and bottom-up strategies. The top-down methods encompass the establishment of swift response protocols and capacity-building of local

communities and disaster response units. Meanwhile, bottom-up strategies advocate for enriched dialogue amongst individuals, NGOs, and local governing bodies. This also involves harnessing the cultural knowledge local populations possess concerning disaster management.

The complexity of urbanization, viewed as a wicked system, reflects our world's biggest challenges. The world is a complex and highly connected place increasingly challenged by the impacts of climate change and geopolitical divisions but where leaps in artificial intelligence also present opportunities. To overcome these challenges and benefit from emerging opportunities, our societies need strong institutions and participative governance to facilitate cooperation and sharing of human, physical and technological resources in an equitable and just manner. 

*Keywords: positive peace, wicked systems, SDG 11, SDG 16, sustainability, urbanization*

### About the Author

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