From November 14th - 16th over 200 people gathered in San Diego and Tijuana to address our conference theme: Borderlands, dividing and bridging communities with technology, storytelling and arts.

This was the sixth edition of Build Peace, a conference that explores the intersection between peacebuilding, technology and the arts. Every year, we bring together 200-400 people from across the globe to think critically about emergent challenges to peace in the digital era, and to share peacebuilding innovations that address those challenges. Past conferences have been held in Boston, Cyprus, Zurich, Bogota and Belfast. As we prepare for Build Peace 2020, to be held in Cape Town, South Africa, this report reflects on some of the key conversations of Build Peace 2019.

Build Peace is organised by Build Up, a non-profit that transforms conflict in the digital age. Build Peace lies at the heart of our growing community of practice that thinks critically about conflict in the digital age. Build Peace 2019 was a collaboration between Build Up and Activate Labs, and was funded by the University of San Diego - Kroc School, Escuela Libre de Arquitectura, Creative Associates, Toda Peace Institute, The California Endowment, Alliance for Peacebuilding, PCDN,
Tijuana Immujер, Cultiva Ya, Espacio Migrante, Tijuana Innovadora, Sistema Local de Prevención, and Drexel University.

This is the sixth edition of the Build Peace conference, and every year the theme and inquiry that we propose emerges from the conversations we’ve had in previous years. At the core of all our themes is an overarching question: what is the relationship between digital technologies and peace? This question about the emergent challenges to and opportunities for peace in the digital era is also at the heart of Build Up’s mission. For more on the Build Peace journey since 2014 and the reason for a focus on borders in 2019, you can read the opening remarks from Build Up’s Director here.

EXPLORING THE SUB-THEMES OF BUILD PEACE 2019

At Build Peace 2019 we explored three sub-themes: digital borders, physical borders and social borders. Below, we explore just some of our key takeaways from these conversations, reflecting on how our thinking on each sub-theme advanced through Build Peace.

Digital borders

Since its inception, reflections about digital borders have been at the heart of Build Peace, a conference borne out of a recognition of the power of technology to reinforce borders, as well as its potential to overcome them.

Speakers defined digital borders in myriad ways - as digital representations of physical borders (eg digital mapping), as divisions played out in the digital space (eg polarization) or as a vehicle for connecting people across social, cultural and physical boundaries (eg virtual exchange). Their insights on these topics were particularly important to us in 2019, a year which saw Build Up launch a new program area on Digital Conflict. This program area is exploring how digital spaces are reinforcing political borders through the polarization of public discourse on social media (see our work on The Commons), or how divisive identities are shaping online spaces (see our research on social media narratives on Syrian refugees in Lebanon).

Key takeaways:

- Although the concept of digital borders is not new to peacebuilders, Build Peace 2019 highlighted the need for greater nuance in how we address this topic. When it comes to
polarization, misinformation and hate speech, for example, there is a need for a deep contextual analysis of the issue, across geographies, social media platforms and topics. As evident in the Toda Peace Institute’s ten policy briefs on social media and conflict, the nature of digital borders look very different in different contexts. Specifically, the way that the digital space interacts with individual and group identity differs greatly across contexts and has not been sufficiently addressed at a local level. Efforts are increasingly being made to understand the linkages between local context, group identities and social media, and we look forward to following this conversation at future Build Peace conferences.

- **Interventions that address digital borders face familiar challenges.** Although requiring new techniques, the familiar challenge of reaching beyond the ‘usual suspects’ of peacebuilding programming surfaced repeatedly - whether in targeting social media users with alternative narratives, or bringing new participants into conversations about depolarization. It was also recognized that while there are opportunities to engage across digital borders, physical engagement is an important and necessary complement to digital dialogue and other online interactives when possible.

- **Digital borders are relevant, even in low internet settings.** The interaction of digital spaces with offline divisions is not rigid. As one workshop pointed out, misinformation can move from ‘Facebook posts by South Sudanese diaspora in Australia, to Juba and then out via phone calls and text messages to places with no internet, belying the idea that social media misinformation is irrelevant in areas with limited internet’. This makes the concept of digital borders relevant, even in areas that are less ‘digitized’.

- There is room for greater collaboration between peacebuilders and the technology sector. Both communities must become more familiar with each other, work to demystify sector-specific language and strengthen opportunities for collaboration. Discussions between social media platforms and peacebuilders should go beyond content moderation, recognising that more must be done to manage conflict in the digital space.
Physical borders

In the words of Jorge Caraballo, keynote speaker on the second day of Build Peace, “sometimes we are trapped inside digital borders, and we need to get out to think, feel, see, touch each other”. These remarks set the stage for a day dedicated to the exploration of physical borders, beginning with a border crossing, with participants from San Diego walking across the US-Mexico border to our venue in Tijuana. We ended the day with an event at the Bi-National Friendship park, a cross-border space designed to allow individuals on both sides of the US-Mexico border to interact across a communal garden.

The conference’s cross-border location brought out the significance of this sub-theme for all participants, serving as a concrete reminder of the need to address the impact of physical borders on political, social and economic divisions.

The conversation took us back to Build Peace 2015, held in the divided city of Nicosia, Cyprus. Revisiting this topic in 2019 allowed us to reflect on the ongoing importance of physical borders and the heightened relevance of the topic to public discourse and peacebuilding in the US and Europe.
Key takeaways:

- **Physical borders intersect with individual and community identity.** As Caraballo put it, crossing a physical border is an act that redefines identity. Encountering a physical border is a deeply personal experience in which our identity is brought to the forefront, and is altered, questioned or affirmed. The fragility of this moment is captured in stories from Radio Ambulante, that seek to humanize the experience of migration as a counter to the divisive narratives around migration.

- **Pain is evident at borders.** Whilst digital borders can bridge some divides, no amount of digital bridging can account for the pain and loss associated with physical borders. Nowhere was this more evident than in the workshop organised by ‘Repatriate Our Patriots’, an advocacy group for deported US Military Veterans. First hand experience of deportation and the effect it had both on the individuals and their families brought home the reality of borderlands to participants.

- **Physical borders bring opportunity, as well as contestation.** They serve as points of authority and division, but they can also serve as points of connection. The community initiatives that we explored on our second day in Tijuana present just some of these opportunities. In her short talk, Paulina Olvera Cáñez, founder of Espacio Migrante, shared how community can be a form of resistance at borders. Her stories of connection between Haitian migrants and the local community in Tijuana brought out the opportunity of borderlands.

- There is an emerging sector of engineers and other technical professionals who recognize their impact on context goes beyond construction and production. A role for “peace engineers” is emerging where engineers accept their responsibility to pay greater attention to context and to the potential unintended consequences of their technical solutions. They recognize that they too need to understand the importance of building trust with the beneficiaries of their interventions to ensure their initiatives contribute to positive peace.

- **Digital tools intersect with physical borders.** Speakers emphasized how digital tools such as collaborative GIS mapping can help overcome some of the contestation of physical borders, or how communications can minimise the impact of divisions brought about by physical borders. Others talked about how virtual dialogue platforms can help increase inclusion where physical borders may limit it, enabling more participants to be involved in discussions about peace.
**Social borders**

Build Peace’s third day explored the nature of social borders. These social borders may be more subtle, played out along cultural, demographic, political, intercommunal and economic lines, but they are equally present in discussions around conflict and peacebuilding.

**Keynote speaker** Pamela Ayo Yetunde spoke not only about the social borders defined above, but about the internal social borders that guide us as individuals. She urged us to overcome the inner borders we set for ourselves, calling for a ‘new breed of leaders’ to stand up, to organise, and to overcome the habits and that we’ve designed to separate each other.

Ayo’s words reminded participants of the need for social resilience at a time when so many digital and physical borders are hardening. As countries close borders, and digital battlegrounds are magnifying, the need to overcome social borders is ever greater. In addition, the challenge of social borders often lives on beyond that of physical borders - as one short talk speaker noted, ‘although we signed a peace agreement two years ago, we are more divided than ever’.

**Key takeaways:**

- **Cultural events are important ways to foster community.** Speakers explored the role of **festivals** as a ‘catalyst for empathy’, providing creative space for participants to break out
of social norms and to overcome routines that divide us. Others looked at joint music-making, and performing arts as a way to reframe narratives, providing new tools to communicate across borders.

- **The redrawing of social borders can help overcome physical and digital borders.** In the words of Caraballo, where physical borders may be rigid, ‘cultural boundaries are a lot more fluid’, allowing for cultural shifts and the redrawing of boundaries. Espacio Migrante’s example of a Haitian migrant working as a ‘Tacquería’ in Tijuana is just one example of this process.

- **Overcoming social borders is as much a personal challenge as a peacebuilding one.** Building on Ayo’s keynote speech that encouraged individuals to stand up to their own internal habits, another short talk speaker noted that ‘unless we own up and manage our personal boundaries, external borders will remain and play out our inner conflicts.'