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# CONCEPTUALIZING STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: THE PEACE MOVEMENT AS A STRATEGIC RESPONDENT TO COVID-19

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## Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the website 'Humanitarian Disarmament' issued an Open Letter calling for the reallocation of military spending to humanitarian causes. Soon, over 260 actors from a variety of policy areas collectively supported a common goal: peace and disarmament as a pathway to health. While disarmament has originally been a core issue of the peace movement, societal actors that do not necessarily belong to the peace movement have contributed to reframing the disarmament narrative as part of a broader and more inclusive concept of peace. We suggest that this move demonstrates an increasing awareness for the interdependencies and complexities of global environmental, socio-economic, political and military challenges as potential threats to peace. Furthermore, by analyzing the way the peace movement identifies and responds to the pandemic as a window of opportunity through a narrative shift, we zoom in on the connection between strategic narratives and social movements. This working paper is the first report from an interdisciplinary project at Universität Hamburg and it sets the conceptual grounds for a qualitative analysis of documents issued between 2020 and 2021 by the signatories of the Open Letter on COVID-19 and Humanitarian Disarmament. We set the methodological process that is used throughout the research where we focus on diagnostic and prognostic framing to identify how the international peace movement has strategically shifted its narrative in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

## Key words

COVID-19, pandemic, strategic narratives, trans-system social rupture, disarmament, peace movement, sustainable peace, social movements

# CONCEPTUALIZING STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: THE PEACE MOVEMENT AS A STRATEGIC RESPONDENT TO COVID-19

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## Introduction

Narratives are a central element to the way we understand world politics because they create connections and give “significance to interdependent events over time” (Bushel et al, 2017: 41). Due to their relevance, narratives have become increasingly popular in International Relations (IR) leading to a “narrative turn” (Squire, 2008; Miskimmon et al, 2017; Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2020). Despite this growing interest, the role of narratives as a strategic instrument used by actors for pursuing strategic objectives is often underexplored in IR narrative research, which frequently focuses on political elites only (Miskimmon et al, 2013; van Hoef and O’Connor, 2019; Drinkwater et al., 2021). Such an approach to strategic narratives is especially apparent because initial traction focused on analyses of war and conflict (Schmitt, 2018). Here, these elite’s narratives are often tied to defense or military strategies (Freedman, 2006; Irvin-Erickson, 2017; Livingston and Nassetta, 2018). Social movements, while playing a key role for establishing and promoting narratives (Davis 2002), are rarely connected to strategic narratives (McCorkel and Rodriguez, 2009; Bevan et al., 2020). This tendency has compartmentalized the literature (Coticchia, 2016) and sustained “existing research in IR on strategic narratives (...) separated from the social movements literature” (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2020: 2).

Against the extant literature on strategic narratives emphasizing elite agency in shaping and carrying narratives, we observe the role of social movements in the creation of strategic narratives. We argue that upholding a separation between the two is problematic because, through narratives, social movements are deeply involved in the politics of signification by producing or maintaining meaning (Wittmayer et al, 2019). Thus, strategic narratives require being approached through a recognition of the role of other actors as well. While previous research has explored the role of the scientific community and mass media in communicating complex problems (Weingart, et al, 2000), we instead explore the role of social movements in narrative formation in more detail to advance our understanding on how narratives are remade in specific contexts. Our project therefore studies how grass-root groups from the peace movement use strategic narratives in their narrative responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This first paper aims at conceptualizing the framework for the analysis whose results will be presented in a separate working paper.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, societal actors increasingly referred to the social effects of COVID-19 in their narratives to shine light over existing problems. This situation created some interesting intersections across narratives from a diverse group of societal actors.

One outstanding development in response to the pandemic by social movements occurred in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic. The website 'Humanitarian Disarmament' issued the Open Letter on COVID-19 and Humanitarian Disarmament (HD, 2020) which called for making use of the momentum created by the pandemic in order to reallocate military spending to humanitarian causes and strategies to reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic. It envisaged a comprehensive transition to a post-pandemic context which included the strategies of prioritizing human security, relocating military spending, working to eliminate inequalities, and fomenting cooperation. The letter's purpose consisted in focusing on the ways in which disarmament could enhance human security and living conditions in light of the pandemic. Over 260 societal actors soon signed the letter, collectively supporting a common goal: disarmament as a pathway towards health. While many of the signing parties are traditionally linked to the peace movement, signatories notably include actors from a variety of policy fields not usually considered representing the peace movement such as environmentalism and public health.

The letter thus represents a collective response to the pandemic by a diverse group of societal actors arguing to shift attention to the importance of peace and disarmament as means to address the pandemic. What we observe is how a particular event is strategically used by social movements to reinterpret the linkages between disarmament and the pandemic in terms of a more sustainable peace. If empirical research would confirm this observation, this would advance our understanding of strategic narratives in several areas. First, it would demonstrate the important role of social movements in the development of strategic narratives in a policy field that existing research consider primarily driven by strategic narratives from political elites. Second, it would provide insights into how the peace movement reframes the issue of disarmament as a topic of sustainable peace rather than a traditional security issue, making social movements key to developing a novel strategy towards sustainable peace. Finally, such findings would also underline that trans-system social ruptures play an important role as windows of opportunity for social movements in strategically converging their narratives.

We build our argument on this observation by asking: how does the international peace movement uses the pandemic to shape strategic narratives? The overall goal of this working paper is to conceptualize the theoretical and analytical framework applied to explore the role and effects that a global crisis such as the pandemic has in strategic narratives from social movements. Thus, we look at how the pandemic is perceived by the broader peace movement and consequently used to shift its narratives pushing towards rethinking peace. In order to address the existing research gap surrounding strategic narratives and social movements, we consider the multidimensionality of the peace movement (Melucci, 1988; 1989), the interconnectedness of diverse policy fields, and the global entanglements of societal and military challenges. To that end, we turn to the analysis of narratives by dissecting them into diagnostic and prognostic framings. This move provides us with a better understanding of collective construction of narrative, opportunity and strategy (Moor and Wahlstöm, 2019).

Through this project, we aim to contribute to social movement studies and IR by connecting strategic narratives and social movements. We explore the ability of social movements to exercise their agency through the creation of narratives in which they express their stances and try to influence policy debates and policy choices by addressing a trans-system

social rupture. The research also provides insights into the societal dimensions of sustainability by emphasizing the increasing importance of the complex relationship between social and environmental causes of conflict. Finally, we also argue that societal actors use COVID-19 as an exceptional global crisis to strengthen the relevance of their political agendas.

Section one introduces the context in which the narrative shift occurs and its characteristics. We approach the pandemic as a trans-system social rupture which is identified as a window of opportunity by the peace movement. Section two details the use of narratives by societal actors, namely the peace movement. Our focus lies on social movements' capacity as strategic respondents. The research addresses their use of strategic narratives when they become aware of certain events and respond according to that context. Section three offers an overview of the historical and contemporary relations between weapons and health and serves as an introduction to the current pandemic situation. Section four discusses the methodological approach to explore narratives. We systematize the interpretive analysis through narrative elements divided into diagnostic and prognostic framing. The summary argument holds that this approach helps understand bottom-up collective narrative shifts through the eventuality of a trans-system social rupture.

## **The Pandemic as a Trans-System Social Rupture**

COVID-19 has made 2020 a turning point for the world and it has already altered many aspects of our lives. In multiple ways, it has been a disaster for the international system (Hameiri 2021; Mehrl and Thurner 2020). Disastrous events are known to “cause stress by their impact on the infrastructure and through the societal disruption that it precipitates” (Foster, 1976: 243). However, because of the characteristics of the pandemic, we require a concept that fully includes all its dimensions. This follows the argument that small crisis or disasters do not “lead to significant changes in societies, institutions, and organizations because the impacts can be managed within existing regulatory regimes” but “this applies much less strongly to major disasters” (Birkman et al., 2010: 638). To that effect, we turn to Wachtendorf's (2009) concept of trans-system social ruptures. The term “describes events that reach beyond societal boundaries and disrupt multiple social systems. In such cases, impacts extend across national political boundaries, spread quickly (...) potentially impact a large number of people, produce an exceptional level of emergent behavior, and do not lend themselves to local-level solutions” (Wachtendorf, 2009: 380). Tierney (2012) suggests that these kind of trans-system social ruptures are “disasters that affect two or more societies simultaneously or in rapid succession” and which “require extensive cross-national and cross-institutional collaboration” (Tierney, 2012: 343).

The COVID-19 pandemic exhibits the characteristics of a trans-system social rupture. It has reached every country in the world infecting a large amount of people. As of the writing of this paper, the pandemic quickly spread, having over 500 million recorded cases globally and more than six million attributed deaths (CSSE, 2022). Therefore, local-level measures have been set in place to “flatten the curve” of infection and prevent the collapse of national healthcare systems such as the implementation of social distancing and self-isolation measures, the enforcement of a shutdown of local businesses, the banning of international travel and the closing of borders, as well as comprehensive testing and vaccination campaigns in some



countries (Bargués, 2020). But because the impact of the pandemic is not limited to public health (Navone, 2020), those measures have not prevented the pandemic from disrupting multiple social systems with an unequal impact on different groups of the society (Shadmi et al., 2020; Katikireddi et al., 2021).

A pandemic “affects state capacity and regional stability by weakening national economy, social stability, and political institutions” (Huang, 2015: 86). Therefore, it has had serious global economic (Pahl et al., 2020) and democratic (Afsahi, 2020) implications which have increased armed conflict risks and circumstances that derive from them (Ide, 2021). The effects will continue to manifest in a myriad of ways with implications for human security (Brzoska et al. 2021). On the one hand, there is the worsening poverty, the triggering of famines and undermining trust in governments (Moyer and Kaplan, 2020). This event has undermined state capability with a fiscal revenue strain, decrease in income, and the re-deployment and/or reduction of police and military due to disease containment tasks. On the other hand, there is the aggravation of existing conflict dynamics (Garcia, 2020), an increase in violent confrontations, the instrumentalization of response measures from states to politically repress or curtail political and civil rights (Bethke and Wolff, 2020), or the suspension or hampering of peace processes (Kasten, 2020). The latter is aggravated by the further reduction of UN peacekeeping funds and peacekeepers and the way peacekeeping missions work to avoid becoming a vector of the disease (Coning, 2020). This context is important because narratives must always be considered in the historical moment in which they are brought forward (Riessman, 2008).

Within the context of a trans-system social rupture such as the pandemic, some societal actors have recognized a window of opportunity to bring forward some changes in diverse governance areas because of the urgency, tangibility and speed of the virus outbreak. Birkman et al (2010) suggest there are two ways in which windows of opportunity open: events in the political realm or the appearance of compelling problems. We locate the pandemic in the latter as its dimension has led “progressive intellectuals and movements to consider the COVID-19 pandemic to have opened opportunities to build a fairer world” (Pleyers, 2020: 3). As the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom states, “[t]his crisis can bring us together in solidarity: not just to flatten the curve against the coronavirus but also to protect our shared environment, and to strengthen and sustain the well-being of all” (Acheson, 2020).

These debates exemplify the re-thinking of peace as sustainable peace. It builds on academic debates and political developments that emphasize the linkages between peace and security, economic well-being and social justice (Duffield 2013; Tschirgi et al. 2010), as well as the ecological and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (Biermann et al 2022). The idea of sustainable peace is most famously tied to Johan Galtung’s (1969) concept of positive and negative peace. According to Galtung, negative peace refers to the absence of physical or direct violence, while positive peace is characterized by the absence of structural violence and the development towards social justice. The goal of sustainable peace is deconstructing “structures, situations, and relationships that cause conflict” but also emphasizing the need of “building structures, situations and relationships that support peace” (Bond, 2013: 64). In order

to accomplish such conditions, other actions must be introduced that, “while not explicitly designed to sustain peaceful conditions, can contribute to sustaining peace” (PBSO, 2017: 2).

Therefore, when we refer to a sustainable peace, we refer to one whose durability reflects the conditions necessary for communities to thrive (Bond, 2013). The sustainability-peace nexus (Sharifi et al. 2021), the concept of human security (Acharya 2001; Kaldor 2007), and debates about peace and security in the Anthropocene (Brauch et al. 2016; Sears 2020) are a second important point of reference for the idea of sustainable peace. Scholars emphasize the far-reaching effects of climate change and other environmental transformations that require novel forms of global cooperation for providing lasting solutions to economic and social well-being. On the level of policy, such thinking has helped to promote the concept of sustainable development. It builds on the idea that peace cannot be achieved as an isolated policy goal, but requires holistic approaches addressing environmental, economic, and social challenges alike. Several policies within the United Nations have helped to promote this thinking of interconnected global challenges since the late 1980s, most notably the report *Our Common Future* (1987), the *Agenda 21* (1992), the *Millennium Development Goals* (2000), and especially the *Agenda 2030*. Adopted in 2015, the agenda defines the *Sustainable Development Goals*, a set of 17 goals aiming at sustainable and effective solutions to the world’s most pressing challenges. Aside from a roadmap of specific strategies to address these challenges, they also emphasize a holistic approach to the nexus between peace, development, and sustainability. Following such thinking, health is a crucial condition for peace and vice versa. Referring to the idea of sustainable peace therefore allows to shift narratives about feasible strategies to supporting and maintaining peace. In the following section, we characterize the peace movement and discuss the way it uses narratives to initiate social change.

## **The Peace Movement as a Strategic Respondent**

Social movements have been able to adopt a global orientation (Hewson and Sinclair, 1999). They have come to represent “one of the most dynamic expressions of resistance” (Downing, 2001: 23). So much so that they have been taken for granted as the “natural form of popular claim-making” (Tilly, 2006: 182), and thus participate in policy and decision-making processes for regulation of different areas in varying degrees (de Senarclens and Kazancigil, 2007). As a result, they are contributing to a redefinition of different practices at national, regional and global governance levels (Fawcett, 2007). Therefore, social movements have become a relevant actor in the contemporary global political situation (Westergren, 2016) through, among others, the transnationalization of advocacy (Lehoucq and Tarrow, 2020).

Social movements are networks of informal interactions among individuals, groups, and organizations with shared identities, interpretations, rituals, beliefs and goals (Diani, 1992; Davis, 2002). Therefore, they are “fields of actors” with a variety of goals and strategic preferences (de Moor and Wahlström, 2019). They “organize people, resources, and ideas for social change [...] as contentious forms of collective action operating at least partly outside institutionalized politics” (Armstrong and Bartley, 2007: 1). One of the strategies they use are narratives which in turn makes them deeply involved in the politics of signification (Wittmeyer et al, 2019). Social movements use narratives to construct stories about themselves, construct particular and/or alternative versions of reality, connect individuals or initiatives to particular



topics, shape actor's interests and identities, or construct projected and imagined futures that can manipulate impressions about their own social movement with the goal of attracting attention or raising awareness to a particular problematic (Benford, 1993; Devetak, 2013; Miskimmon, 2013; Wittmayer et al., 2019; de Moor and Wahlström, 2019). Narratives are particularly important for social movements because actors are able to use them in order to "transform our lives and the social contexts in which we exist" (Bold, 2012: 30). Despite the recognition of the different ways social movements are able to claim agency through narratives, we focus on a particular mode. Social movements may use narrative strategies whenever they become aware of certain events and identify them as opportunities, thus effectively responding to the context (Moor and Wahlström, 2019). Because of these features, we zoom in on their capacity as strategic respondents.

While there is little agreement on the precise definition of a narrative, in this research, we understand narratives as issue-oriented linguistic "tools of agency" (Miskimmon et al, 2013: 14) where societal actors contingently and intentionally (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2020) structure events and actions within a timeline (Wittmayer et al., 2019) with a strategic character (Miskimmon, 2013). First, they are issue oriented because they seek "to shape the terrain on which policy discussions take place" (Miskimmon, 2013: 10) and require human agency (Patterson and Monroe, 1998). This agency is exhibited in the use of narratives as "resources in contemporary political struggles" (Devetak, 2013: 191). Second, the process through which events are selected, linked and ordered "to create an overarching framework of meaning" (Colley, 2017: 11) is regarded as intentional in each and every step. Third, narratives are contingent because they occur "at a historical moment with its circulating discourses and power relations" (Riessman, 2008: 8). Therefore, they are structured in relation to internal and external events (Wittmayer et al., 2019). However, they are also contingent because there is a need for social movements to ensure that claims resonate with the experiences of its audience or constituencies (Benford, 1993).

Audiences play a major role in the construction of narratives because in order to construct both narratives and shared meanings, narrators need to include other elements that are present in society and which are relevant or significant for the audience (Chadwick, 2000). Applied in this way, narratives provide actors with powerful sources for legitimizing and justifying their views, but resonance with target audiences is crucial (Smith Ochoa et al. 2021: 218). Rich and Taylor (2000) argue that the audiences process narratives depending on their cohesion and coherence. The former refers to the way in which the audience connects new information to previous ideas and the latter involves consistent relationships throughout the narrative. This means that narratives must be recognized as valid in their connection to what was known before and they must correspond with the audience's cultural narrations such as stories, myths, traditions and folk tales of their culture (Benford, 1993; Coticchia, 2016; Polleta and Chen, 2017; Schmitt, 2018).

Finally, we consider narratives as strategic because they are tools for societal actors to "change the discursive environment in which they operate" and "influence the behavior of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon et al., 2017: 3). Keck and Sikkink (1999) argue

that societal actors seek ways to bring issues to the public agenda by framing old problems in innovative ways.

Taking strategic respondents use of narratives into account, we follow Cianciara (2016) who argues that once they perceive contexts of uncertainty and insecurity – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – they can produce a narrative shift. According to Cianciara (2016), we can speak of a narrative shift in two cases: when patterns of dominance change or when connections between components are altered. In the project, we note that the addition of a new component such as the pandemic and the dominance of public health among peace movement actors has already begun to show such an effect. Particularly, we surmise that the peace movement has harnessed the pandemic to shift the framing of disarmament and arms control, aiming at reinforcing their influence on the debate about military spending, arms exports and peace building. But this begs the question: how to analyze narratives and a narrative shift? What should we be looking at?

The problem with an analysis of narratives lies in the way they are dissected. Miskimmon et al. (2013: 10) suggests that “the various components of the narrative must be framed a certain way, so framing must be taken into account.” The elements in which we focus to identify the narrative shift are diagnostic and prognostic framing (Coticchia, 2016). Diagnostic framing is the stage at which the social movement seeks to define the problem, attributions, and causes (Benford and Snow, 2000; Davis, 2002). Its purpose is also to identify those agents that are culpable for the problem (Benford, 1993). Second, prognostic framing involves disagreements over “alternate visions of reality” (Benford, 1993: 689) and ways or routes to transform the problem, identification of possible solutions, tactics and strategies (Benford and Snow, 2000; Davis, 2002). It is at this point that we can see the use of strategic narratives where societal actors “articulate end states and suggest how to get there” (Miskimmon et al., 2017: 7).

However, creating a unified response is a difficult endeavor. Especially across large transnational social movements such as the peace movement. Lehoucq and Tarrow (2020) argue that this kind of social movements face “competition between groups” as well as “different national politics, culture, resources, and institutional access” (Lehoucq and Tarrow, 2020: 162). Yet, if we understand the COVID-19 pandemic as a trans-system social rupture, we would expect the peace movement to strategically use the pandemic for constructing more homogeneous narratives that overcome problems it faces under different circumstances. As a result, the peace movement could improve its political influence by engaging in explicit advocacy and activism, mobilizing public opinion, and putting pressure on policy makers from the outside (Knopf, 2012).

By examining diagnostic and prognostic framings, we can identify the broader strategic narrative used by the peace movement in response to the pandemic. Furthermore, we can analyze whether the peace movement is able or not to use the pandemic as a trans-system social rupture to create a more unified narrative. Our focus highlights the way in which the narrative is changed with the introduction of the pandemic and the role that health plays in the peace movement’s narratives. In the following section, we provide an overview of previous connections made by the peace movement regarding weapons and what we observe during the pandemic.

## Health Intertwined with War and Peace

As we argue, the creation of narratives is a key strategy of social movements to pursue their agendas. The peace movement has for long developed narratives on the disastrous effects of arms and weapons (Salomon, 1986). Weapons are regarded as instruments that sustain authoritarian governments and hamper processes that may lead to democratic governance (Latham, 1996). Arms have also been seen as means to create and fuel conflict (Danwanzam and Saleh, 2019) and a culture of violence that has resulted in unnecessary human suffering (Latham, 1996), human rights violations (Alley, 2022), the undermining of both peace building and reconstruction efforts (Rogers, 2009), as well as enablers that lead to social polarization (Latham, 1996). However, the peace movement has not limited itself to this traditional narrative. Other pressing global issues that might not be immediately or traditionally connected to armament or militarism have also been used in the past, such as peace building and reconstruction efforts, as well as enabling mechanisms to avoid social polarization.

Most notably, climate change has sometimes been addressed as a factor that may increase the risk of violent conflict (Barnett and Adger, 2007) while at other times there has been the rhetorical use of war to “increase the urgency of climate change as a problem” (Kester and Sovacool, 2017: 51). Climate conflicts more likely occur in societies that have experienced a nexus of interrelated problems of poverty, scarcity, disease, hunger, inequality, violence, and environmental degradation. An expert elicitation estimated that with growing warming the likelihood of severe climate–conflict risk could substantially increase but could be reduced through investments addressing known drivers and incorporated into conflict mediation, peacekeeping operations, postconflict aid and reconstruction efforts (Mach et al., 2019: 196) which can create synergies between the reductions of both risk types.

Such synergies can build on conceptual linkages between positive peace and sustainable development. Making sustainable peace a framework for protecting human security against a nexus of violence, environmental and health risks could convert the “vicious circle” into a “virtuous circle” of human development, environmental protection and peace-building and develop opportunities for a satisfying and healthy life based on human rights and justice, social well-being and democratic participation (Brauch et al. 2016). To establish and transfer positive linkages into the political arena can activate established relationships of peace movements and environmental movements which emerged with the anti-nuclear movements of the 1980s, acting against nuclear weapons and nuclear energy in East and West (Zeller and Benford 2022). While these movements are diverse and have multiple roots, they have many issues in common, often addressing the health and humanitarian consequences of war, climate change and environmental destruction, calling for an end of the fossil-nuclear age and its gravest threat of a nuclear winter that would mean the end of human civilization (Scheffran et al. 2016).

Health has numerous direct linkages to peace (Chattu and Knight 2019). For example, health professionals have historically played an important role in many peace efforts (Arya and Santa Barbara 2008). Therefore, the connection is not as unprecedented as it is rather unconventional. Health is an aspect that is “fundamentally political in nature” because it “requires food, shelter, income, equality, a stable ecosystem, and peace” (Nurses for Social Responsibility, in MacQueen, McCutcheon and Santa Barbara, 1997: 178). As such, the connection

has been made before in various ways and there is even evidence that “public health has provided some of the most remarkable examples of cooperation in areas of conflict” (Morse, 2012: 1). One example is the third goal of the UN initiative of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which deals with insurance of good health and well-being of all. Furthermore, the concern with public health is also included in the contents of goal 16, which addresses peace, justice, and the strengthening of institutions to guarantee general welfare. The inclusion of human rights in this particular goal aims towards more effective and inclusive solutions for the emergency of today and the recovery of tomorrow (UN, 2020).

Organizations such as the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) have also been pushed to consider naturally occurring pandemics within the taxonomy of biological threats under the notion of biosecurity. As Adams, Novotny and Leslie suggest, “biosecurity calls for preparedness in the detection and prevention of fast-spreading infective agents such as the SARS coronavirus” (Adams, Novotny and Leslie, 2008: 320-321). However, this consideration legitimates a “state of continuous bio-emergency” and justifies policies and practices including disarmament (Rychnovská, 2017). Katz (2019) has even argued for a response plan or International Health Regulations (IHR) from the World Health Organization (WHO) taking the BWC as a model to enhance health governance related to pandemics.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has had a relevant role within this perspective launching two different appeals. In 1918, it helped in achieving the ban on asphyxiating gasses and it brought forward the “Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity” public appeal in 2002. This drew attention to a humanitarian perspective on the use of life sciences for hostile purposes (Borrie and Loye, 2005). Morse (2012) also points to a ceasefire during the global smallpox eradication campaign similar to the one exhorted by the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) Antonio Gutérres in early 2020. According to the author, this is an example of how public health allows for cooperation in conflicted areas.

Furthermore, public health narratives have also provided other opportunities to achieve negotiations in war contexts. Katz et al (2011) show that the health arguments achieved important goals during armed conflicts. For example, cease-fires were reached in Salvadorian and Lebanese civil wars in the 1980s, and in 1995 during the conflict in Sudan. In 1998, World Health Organization Member States recognized “Health as a Bridge for Peace” and used it to provide tools for health driven interventions during conflict, “ultimately supporting political, structural, and social peace building” (Katz et al, 2011, 510).

MacQueen, McCutcheon and Santa Barbara (1997: 176) have labelled initiatives that intend to “improve the health of people and that simultaneously heightens that group’s level of peace, whether this peace is internal to the group and one or more other groups” as Health-Peace Initiatives (HPI). These authors argue that in modern Western culture, peace and health have been defined as separate concepts and this has been highly institutionalized. However, they state that the impact of war on health is extremely damaging. They suggest that the health track to peace is promising because peace should not be understood as the outcome of just one cause, but of multiple and interacting groups and forces.

Despite all these efforts, initiatives and agreements, many countries have continued to face security primarily in increasingly military terms thereby sustaining the production and trade of weapons (Kimball, 2020). As a result, social movements have usually focused on supply and demand of weapons and policies that aim to control them (Loretz, 2008). Nevertheless, some organizations have been able to draw attention to the link between public health and the weapons industry. The closest example to today's arguments are the claims by Nurses for Social Responsibility who, in 1989, protested the ARMX event, an international arms exhibition, arguing it provided a space for cooperation between governments and the military industry, diverting funds from health and social services (McQueen, McCutcheon and Santa Barbara, 1997). However, the response has been limited to certain actors across the peace movement, and therefore it has not been a unified narrative.

With the pandemic becoming a prominent global health emergency, the most standard narratives and arguments towards disarmament and arms control mentioned at the beginning of this section have taken the back seat among peace movements' narratives. This global health crisis "has laid bare the terrible human cost of [...] misplaced policy choices" (Kimball, 2020). We can observe different arguments from the peace movement that follow this argument. For example, Samuel (2020) coordinated the Strategic Concept for Removal of Arms and Proliferation (SCRAP Weapons) and the Convener of the Global Freeze Weapons Campaign which aim to freeze the production, trade, and supply of arms to allocate those resources for health, safety, and social security in developing countries. Oxfam (2020) supported UN Secretary-General Guterres ceasefire initiative as a means to cope with the far-reaching security implications of the pandemic and argued that the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) would be unable to achieve its goals of ensuring healthcare if there were no effective armistice. Therefore, in order to obtain an integral coronavirus response, conflict zones such as Yemen, Colombia or Afghanistan must reach a ceasefire or else the delivery of medical assistance would be impossible.

Similarly, the International Peace Bureau Youth Network (IPB) argues that sustainable security approaches based on common security and basic human needs must be prioritized, developed, and implemented (IBP, 2020). Among other concerns, it demanded a global ceasefire, a cut of military spending for 2020, and a freezing of expenditures on military equipment for 2021, as well as more comprehensive steps towards disarmament. These narratives have been echoed by different organizations which have also decided to shift their narratives toward a public health approach. On another statement, the IPBYN argues that a reduced military spending can help address a large array of crises faced during the pandemic and beyond (IPB, 2021). Hence, it can be observed that social movements have resorted to strategies that combine peace and public health as a strategy aimed at generating greater public support for disarmament and antimilitarism. The sentence "turning swords into ventilators" – coined by Cynthia Enloe (2020) – is the perfect representation of the sentiment behind the efforts of disarmament and arms control carried out by peace movements during the pandemic. All over the world, they have been encouraging digital protesting, actions and strikes, solidarity towards victims, monitoring policy makers, and the call for politicization (Pleyers, 2020) into what we identify as a sustainable peace. Moving forward, our objective is to analyse the data to explore

the current situation and the impact a trans-system social rupture has in the overall peace movement narrative.

## Methodology

The project applies a qualitative research design of content analysis in order to study whether the peace movement has shifted its narrative in the face of the pandemic as a disruptive event, and to explore the details of this strategic move and the ways it pushes towards a broader understanding of peace. Narratives are “frameworks through which we conceive of and pursue politics” (Alexander-Floyd, 2013: 471). They can be analyzed in different ways given it “refers to a diverse set of methods, a ‘family’ of interpretive approaches” (Riessman, 2008: 183). Following the definition we use in this article, we approach it as a representational device – a communication or representational tool – used to influence the audience (Robert and Shenhav, 2014). We rely on narrative analysis to “integrate the individual details and complexity” and see the “multiple and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning” and “reconstruct meanings through linking these layers” (Esin, 2011: 95).

The empirical research is carried out based on narrative analysis with a special attention to framing as “frames exist within strategic narratives” (Livingston and Nassetta, 2018). This follows Coticchia (2016: 196) who argues that “distinguishing frames and narratives helps in better identifying all the elements of the discursive process.” We focus on documents issued by the peace movement during the COVID-19 pandemic. These documents offer an entry point for studying the observed narrative with reference to the narrative strategies of the peace movement. Specifically, our research analyses the Open Letter on COVID-19 and Humanitarian Disarmament because its authorship represents a wide variety of peace movement actors that addressed disarmament and the global health crisis as joint issues. This follows the approach of this project that understands peace as a concept that should consider the interdependencies and complexities of current challenges allowing the inclusion of a broader set of social demands into the peace movement.

The Open Letter was swiftly signed by organizations around the world following the humanitarian disarmament approach (Abramson, 2020). By June of 2020, 266 organizations around the globe had already signed it. From this universe, we reduce the sample applying two filters: the first excluded private companies and corporations, and the second was the decision to only include organizations with online platforms communicating in English. That is, organizations that did not have an online portal (a website or a blog), or that only published in languages other than English were excluded from our dataset. The decision answers to the fact that the working group has an international background and crosschecking requires language competency. Thus, we further analyzed their websites distinguishing between those that referred directly to linkages of the pandemic with peace and conflict, or disarmament and arms control. By doing so, we have gathered 220 documents from 53 different organizations for the period between March 2020 and early 2021.

As the first outcome of the deskstudy period, we designed a codebook in order to systematize the mapping of the field based on statements made by the organizations. This research analyzes the documents issued by these actors through four types of coding with



descriptive, actor, source and content variables. The first type of codes refers to the descriptive variables, which allows us to see who carries out the coding. The second type contains actor variables also allowing us to observe what kind of organization issues the analyzed sources. The third type includes sources to distinguish the source analyzed. Finally, the fourth and most interesting type includes content variables. Since the research follows a thematic model that puts the content of the narrative at the center of the analysis (Esin, 2011), we use the variables to identify the elements of the narrative of the analyzed source. The material is coded through a combination of deductive and inductive strategies to navigate through the empirical material.

First, we search for indications that the peace movement is perceiving the trans-system social rupture as a window of opportunity. This allows us to identify a clear relation between the pandemic and the narrative shift. From the original sample, 44.53% of the societal actors explicitly identified the Coronavirus pandemic as a window of opportunity. Organizations such as War Prevention Initiative have argued that “[w]e must redirect resources to where they are needed. The COVID-19 global pandemic has made this clearer than ever” (WPI, 2020). Although the rest of the sampled documents do not mention the pandemic as a window of opportunity explicitly, it can be observed that the trans-system social rupture does influence the way they shape their narratives and the way they address the problems. For example, the organization Humanity and Inclusion (2020a; 2020b) does not identify the pandemic as a window of opportunity. However, the event influences their texts in a major way illustrating how it disproportionately impacts vulnerable people in conflict zones and drawing attention to the limited resources and fragility of health systems that impede providing these vulnerable groups with assistance.

Afterwards, we systematize the interpretive analysis through two dimensions: diagnostic and prognostic framing. Diagnostic framing (Benford, 1993; Benford and Snow, 2000; Davis, 2002) establishes four different variables that will allow us to proceed with the coding: problem definition, problem attribution, causes and the identified culpable agent(s). We analyze what is the specific problem they identify, what are the characteristics and causes of the problem, and the responsible agents (Table 1). This way, we are able to identify what are the different ways in which they connect the pandemic to disarmament, peace and conflict. The latter consists of the articulation of solutions, tactics and/or strategies that the actor suggests to solve the problem (Benford and Snow, 2000; Davis, 2002).

**Table 1.** Variables of Diagnostic Framing

| Problem Definition                                  | Problem Attribution   | Problem Cause(s)   | Culpable Agent(s)  |
|---|---|--|--|
| What is the problem identified by the organization? | What are the characteristics of the problem identified by the organization? | What are the causes of the problem identified by the organization? | Who or what is causing the problem identified by the organization? |

The advantage of using diagnostic and prognostic framing as dimensions for the study is that, since we are interested in exploring the narrative shift, we need to be able to identify either

the change in patterns of dominance or the alteration of the connections between components to understand not only what is the narrative, but how it is said at this point in time due to the presence of a trans-system social rupture. We are interested in analyzing the role that health plays in the narratives of the peace movement actors, as well as the connections that are constructed between public health, conflict, military spending, disarmament and violence. Religions for Peace (RfP, 2020) offers the following example:

**Table 2.** Diagnostic Framing of the Pandemic

| Problem Definition  | Problem Attribution   | Problem Cause(s)   | Culpable Agent(s) |
|---|---|--|-------------------|
| Hostilities and armed conflict despite the COVID-19 pandemic. | People already face challenges accessing healthcare, shelter, food and water. | Hostilities and lack of resources to protect and heal everyone from the virus. | Military spending |

As part of the prognostic framing, we observe Religions for Peace offer strategies to solve the problem that involve the reallocation of economic resources from military to healthcare expenditure:

“We urge you to reallocate a portion of your military budget to your healthcare budget. Instead of purchasing more weapons, purchase medical supplies, personal protective equipment, testing kits and medications. Instead of spending on warfare, dedicate the funds to support the vulnerable, including refugees, migrants, and internally displaced persons to ensure their access to testing, treatment, clear water, and hygiene supplies. Instead of finding means to end lives, let us work together to save lives” (RfP, 2020).

Next, we proceed to group-coded segments into categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This allows us to access the different claims from the peace movement within both diagnostic and prognostic framing. We are then able to distinguish patterns among the different actors in the peace movement and ultimately identify homogeneity or heterogeneity in narratives as a result of the shift produced during the trans-system social rupture. The identification of convergent or divergent narratives is important because they have political consequences. They can potentially lead to very different actions and responses (McGinty and Firchow, 2016). This means that the same problem is addressed in either similar or different ways, exhibiting the permeation of the narrative shift influenced by the trans-system social rupture.

By carrying out this analysis, we aim to determine the most prominent narratives, the patterns of dominance of narrative components and/or the alteration of connections between the narrative components. We are also able to see patterns across the narratives in order to identify narrative divergence or convergence among the different actors within the peace movement.

## Summary Argument

This research focuses on the connection between the peace movement and its use of strategic narratives to advance our understanding on how narratives function in specific contexts across the peace movement. Our attention is directed towards the COVID-19 pandemic as a trans-system social rupture that provides the context for the narrative shift. We surmise that the peace movement identifies the pandemic as a window of opportunity to shift a narrative and thus connects diverse social claims. This approach allows us to study two distinct yet interconnected aspects of social movements and strategic narratives moving away from a traditional top-down state centric perspective.

First, we explore the way in which the peace movement addresses “non-traditional aspects of human security” (Diehl, 2016: 2) during the pandemic. In order to do so, we zoom in on the narratives created during the first year and a half of the pandemic to understand how the peace movements uses such narrative shift while seeking to introduce broader understandings of peace into the public debates. We argue that this narrative shift offers novel insights into how peace is conceptualized as it takes seriously the interdependencies and complexities of global environmental, socio-economic, political and military challenges. The narrative shift reinforces the idea that societies must not only “create ways of addressing the root causes of conflicts” (Igbuzor, 2011: 4), but also the conditions that allow the sustainment of peace.

Second, we explore how a trans-system social rupture provides the context for the peace movement to produce homogeneous or heterogeneous strategic narratives. We emphasize the importance of narratives as tools to “connect dispersed individuals or initiatives to particular topics ‘bottom-up’, in regional, national and transnational networks” (Wittmeyer et al., 2019: 8). The fact that social movements are networks (Davis, 2002) or fields of actors (de Moor and Wahlström, 2019) is a relevant feature. Since the peace movement consists of a considerable number of actors with different agendas and specific objectives that may not always be shared among them, constructing a single consistent narrative is a major endeavor. Nevertheless, the pandemic as a trans-system social rupture provides them with the juncture to focus on certain aspects of the social reality to advance the myriad of claims into a single direction more homogeneously. A global health crisis could change the status quo given the coronavirus pandemic “has laid bare the terrible cost of (...) misplaced policy choices” (Kimball, 2020).

Our project contributes to several ongoing debates in IR about the political implications of Covid-19. Unlike existing research investigating whether and in how far the pandemic causes an increasing level of violent conflict (Ide 2021), our research studies how the pandemic is used as a strategic device by social movements and adds to debates about the role of social movements in global politics (West 2013). Our project also highlights how the use of such a trans-system social rupture allows the peace movement to initiate a narrative shift towards a broader concept of sustainable peace that includes the issues of disarmament and health alike. Finally, it provides empirical data about the linkages between peace and health in social movement narratives. Further research on these issues seems of great importance given the historical uniqueness of the current pandemic as well as the importance of better understanding the

complex interdependencies of global environmental, socio-economic, political and military challenges as potential threats to peace.

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