

Cambridge Enterprise: Q&A

with Joao Costa, PhD researcher at the Institute for Criminology and creator of the peace-building methodology Peace Behind the VOI.



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Hi Joao and thanks for chatting to us today! Could you give us a quick introduce to yourself and your work?

Hi thanks for having me! I'm currently finalising my PhD and about to submit – happy days! In the last year of my research, I've been focusing more or less exclusively on this project, Peace Behind the VOI. This is a peace-building methodology which seeks to help communities that are divided by armed violence to become peaceful, to secure peaceful coexistence and to ensure that the impact of violence is minimized. In a nutshell, that's what my work is about.

What are the big questions in the field and how do you situate your work alongside that of other researchers?

My work is in peace building – or more broadly peace and conflict studies – but it started off with a political philosophy question. You might be familiar with the Veil of Ignorance (VOI) which was put forward by John Rawls as a thought experiment and which I have translated into the area of peace building, and I can explain that a little more when we begin to talk through the intervention itself.

In peace and conflict studies, scholars and practitioners are working at the same aim which is to understand the root causes of violence and conflict, and how to overcome them – how to make the world more peaceful and allow people to live without the negative influence of violence, and the fear and the mental and physical health problems that are attached to violence.

The core of *Peace behind a VOI* is to improve interpersonal relationships. All of the methodology is structured around emotions and emotional regulation, drawing on social identity theory. How can we use our different identities and how can we create a superordinate identities in order to interact more peacefully and therefore again improve our relationships, which in turn will minimize the likelihood and impact of violence?

A scholarly approach focuses more around theoretical methods; but practitioners on the ground don't necessarily have the same theoretical background and have different kinds of insight and experience about how an intervention can work. In my work, I am trying to bridge that gap and address that gap, trying to link practice and research more closely.

Can you tell us how your VOI intervention is designed? What differentiates the VOI concept from other types of intervention?

The VOI is a methodology that has three phases. The first phase is the baseline in which we work with the community beneficiaries to generate indicators of peaceful coexistence: what would a peaceful society look like?

In the second stage, we do [VOI exercises](#) to find consensus between opposing groups and try to understand whether it is possible to find common ground on the very basic things that will make life better for all, regardless which side of the conflict they find themselves.

In this second stage we ask individuals to imagine that they don't know which side of the conflict you fall: so for example, in a case of violent conflict between adjacent communities, you could be from village A or village B and you don't know which. You need to propose two solutions that everybody across both sides of the conflict can accept would make life better for all.

And then the third phase would be the phase of social economic interventions in which the community members from the opposing groups implement solutions based on that agreed common ground – potable water, for instance. That's a very common one, especially in these sorts of scenarios. With our partners we then make available a budget to implement these changes: to build a well, for instance, or to create a system that purifies water.

There's no pre-existing hypothesis. It's all based on whatever the community wants to do, and what will be a sign of peace and improve the lives of everyone. They can be economic solutions, but a lot of them are in fact more symbolic. For instance, I had [communities where they used to have dance festivals together](#), and the proposal was to revive these festive activities between the two groups.

Can you tell us something about how you work with communities and partners in order to localise and deliver the intervention? Are there groups where you think actually this probably wouldn't work? And how do you identify places that you can actually reach?

This is really important. The VOI methodology in general is designed for a plethora, a variety of conflict scenarios be that ongoing conflict, post conflict situations or even as a preventative tool. But of course it doesn't work everywhere. We could take the example of Ukraine, where there is a real macro level political will needed to end violence around this crisis. This is not addressable by VOI. VOI works at the micro level, at the community level - it's very much aimed at the grassroots. It requires a small geographical area where conflicts are based on identarian issues.

Therefore, the question of access to the places and communities is key. That is where our partner institutions come, because as an individual researcher or even a team of researchers, even if we had the funds, it doesn't work to just come in and start a conversation in a situation of armed violence.

I can give two different models of how we've worked. In the first, [I partnered with the UNDP](#), which is an agency with a presence in Guinea Bissau. We had two projects running simultaneously in different areas in the country where villages were fighting each other based on land disputes. And so we went to the field regularly but we always had the UN team with me who had worked with this community and situation previously, who had already status and a foothold on the ground, who could go in and do preliminary consultations to grasp whether the communities could be interested or not in trying something new.

A different model is in Burkino Fasa where we have 6 pilots ongoing in an area that is plagued by violent extremism. Here I am partnered with an NGO called Search For Common Ground. Together, we managed to get the funding from the Government of Canada in order to create a training manual for the VOI. I went to the capital which is Wagga to train the NGO team and we continue to be in regular contact so that they can implement it on the ground autonomously.

Do you frame your work as research or as social entrepreneurship and activism, or how do you think of yourself - especially now coming towards the end of the PhD?

At first this was just research, the idea and the excitement that comes with exploring something that you believe in. But very quickly it became clear to me that it was a long shot to put the research into practice - not just the fact that the idea has to be shown to be effective, but also that I require money and people who believe in the idea to implement it on the ground. That means the UN, for example, not just providing me the funds, but also allocating time from their staff members to go with me to the ground.

And that's when I realized that I became more of an entrepreneur. I remember having a chat with a friend who said what are you trying to achieve is very similar to start-up companies pitching for funding. So for instance I created an [animated video](#) to send to potential partners which briefly explains what I'm trying to achieve – it answers the question of why would I want to collaborate with you? And I started having better, quicker responses.

That makes it easier for me as a person who would not have classified himself as an entrepreneur. But I do try. I'm trying! But it's not a step it is a process.

