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Post-Conflict Societies: Chances for Peace and Types of International Support

Summary

Preventing crises and conflict recurrence in post-conflict societies remains a major concern for international politics. What exactly characterises post-conflict societies, and what are their chances to avoid renewed conflict? What does this mean for peacebuilding efforts, and what types of international support do they receive? Based on a rich compilation of partly newly coded data by the project Supporting Sustainable Peace at the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), this briefing paper analyses international support to 28 countries that emerged out of a civil war after 1990. Moreover, it analyses their predisposition for renewed violence based on established risk factors for recurrence.

Recurring violence haunts many countries that have experienced a civil war. Even after a violent conflict has ended, the challenge to build stable peace seems often insurmountable. In fact, peace frequently falters shortly after it has been achieved. Unfavourable background conditions, often created or intensified by the previous conflict, reinforce the challenge and contribute to the conflict trap countries appear to face. Although much international support has been provided to those struggling to overcome their violent past, the amount of official development assistance (ODA) varies strongly between recipients, as well as among different areas of engagement. Based on the data gathered, three main messages become particularly clear.

First, half of the cases experience civil war recurrence; the other half remain relatively stable. When civil war recurred, it was usually severe and took place within the first five post-conflict years. The risk of recurrence is enhanced by the fact that almost all post-conflict societies struggle with unfavourable background conditions known to amplify the likelihood for renewed political violence, such as conflict in the neighbourhood. Chances for peace do exist, yet policy-makers need to be aware of – and prepared for – the high risk of renewed conflict.

Second, it is striking that those post-conflict societies that receive considerably more international support experience fewer recurrences of civil war. This is even true with respect to each one of the four issue areas that make up international peacebuilding support: socio-economic foundations; security; politics and governance; and societal conflict transformation (SCT). Notably, it is *not* that external actors only choose to engage in the easy cases where they face the most favourable conditions. Although these findings warrant further analysis, they are a strong indication that international support to the four issue areas does indeed reduce a country's likelihood of experiencing renewed violence.

Third, much potential exists to strengthen support to SCT in post-conflict societies. Many practitioners and academics stress that supporting conflict transformation at the societal level and dealing with the past experience of violence is of utmost importance to create sustainable peace. Our new dataset demonstrates that SCT has received the least support by international actors; in one-third of the cases, international donors did not engage in this area at all.

The chances for lasting peace after civil war

Almost all recent occurrences of civil war take place in countries that have experienced major civil wars before (Fiedler, Mross, & Grävingholt, 2016). This highlights the particular challenge the international community faces in supporting sustainable peace in post-conflict societies. Here, we look at 28 countries that experienced one or more civil wars that claimed at least 1,000 battle-related deaths and came to an end between 1990 and 2014. Naturally, a country can experience several highly intense conflicts, thus the data presented here covers 37 post-conflict periods.

Table 1: List of peace periods

Peace period ending in recurrence*	Peace period without major recurrence
Burundi (2007-2008)	Angola (since 2003)
Chad I (1995-1997)	Azerbaijan (since 1996)
Chad II (2004-2005)	Bosnia (since 1996)
Chad III (2011-2015)	Cambodia (since 1999)
Congo (2000-2002)	El Salvador (since 1992)
DRC I (2002-2006)	Guatemala (since 1996)
DRC II (2009-2011)	Indonesia (since 2006)
Ethiopia (1997-1998)	Lebanon (since 1991)
Georgia (1994-2008)	Liberia II (since 2004)
Iraq (1997-2004)	Mozambique (since 1993)
Liberia I (1997-2000)	Nepal (since 2007)
Libya (2012-2014)	Nicaragua (since 1991)
Rwanda I (1995-1996)	Peru (since 2000)
Rwanda II (2003-2009)	Rwanda III (since 2013)
Serbia (1993-1998)	Serbia + Kosovo (since 2000)
Sri Lanka I (2002-2005)	Sierra Leone (since 2002)
Uganda I (1993-1994)	Sri Lanka II (since 2010)
Uganda II (2012-2013)	Tajikistan (since 1999)
Yemen (1995-2009)	

** Second date indicates the year in which recurrence begins*

Source: Authors (coding based on UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset)

About half of the cases remained relatively stable after the original war: 18 out of the 37 post-conflict periods were not interrupted by civil war recurrence. Yet, for about the same number, sustainable peace remained a distant goal: as Table 1 shows, 19 cases experienced civil war recurrence, which is characterised by renewed violence of high intensity and continuity (rather than sporadic incidences). A clear majority of these recurrences were particularly severe, reaching a similar intensity as the original civil war. Some countries clearly fell into the "conflict trap" of experiencing civil war time and again. Chad and Rwanda, for example, experienced a full civil war three times in the period of analysis.

The risk of recurrence appears to be particularly pronounced in the immediate post-conflict period: two-thirds of all violent recurrences occurred within four years after the previous war had ended, and many even within the first two years. However, severe violence can also break out after years of apparent stability. In Serbia and Iraq, for example, civil war broke out after six and seven years, respectively. Even longer periods should not install a premature feeling of security, as Georgia and Yemen demonstrate, where 13 peaceful years were followed by new outbreaks of major violence.

Predisposition for conflict recurrence

What is the level of difficulty for building peace after civil war among these countries – measured by the prevalence of known risk factors for civil war recurrence? A dominant strand of literature emphasises that structural factors, namely low income, resource dependency and conflict in the neighbourhood, as well as characteristics of the previous civil war, can play a role: when the war involved several warring factions, was short or led to many casualties, recurrence was more likely. How do the 28 countries that emerged out of civil war fare with regard to these factors?

A higher number of warring factions increases the complexity of building a peaceful post-war order. Nine post-conflict periods resulted from civil wars in which only one rebel group had fought against the government. In 28 cases (75 per cent), two or more fighting factions were involved, with more than two factions being more common. An extreme case is Ethiopia, which experienced continued civil war between 1964 and 1996 involving up to seven conflict parties in its course.

The literature mostly agrees that shorter and more intense wars are more likely to recur. Shorter wars may provoke new wars by demonstrating to potential rebels that a battle might be quickly fought and won. In this sample, conflicts were as short as 68 days (Yemen 1994) and lasted up to almost 33 years (Ethiopia). Out of the 37 cases, 17 civil wars lasted less than five years, whereas eight civil wars carried on for more than 15 years.

More intense previous wars are said to be more likely to be followed by new conflicts because they create stronger animosities that cannot be easily settled. In the majority of cases, fatalities remained below 10,000. The five cases with the highest number, by contrast, each claimed more than 100,000 battle deaths over the entire war period. The country with the least intense civil war was Lebanon (1989-1990), with 1,404 fatalities, whereas Ethiopia experienced the most intense violence, with more than 200,000 battle-related deaths.

Conflicts in neighbouring countries can exacerbate the risk of recurrence through negative spill-over effects. Only four countries were not confronted with conflict in their neighbourhood: Indonesia, Mozambique, Sri Lanka and Yemen. All other cases faced neighbouring conflict in their early post-conflict period. In 13 of these 32 cases, only one neighbouring country experienced conflict, but in 19 it was in fact two or more. The Democratic Republic of Congo represents an extreme case in this regard, with six neighbouring conflicts in 2009.

Our data also clearly shows that post-conflict societies are among the poorest of the world. All cases, except for Libya, were low-income or lower-middle-income countries, according to the World Bank definition, with annual per capita incomes ranging from $118 (Liberia 1997) to a maximum of $3,803 (Lebanon 1990). With regard to resource dependency, the picture is more mixed. Whereas some countries had virtually no income from natural resources, such as Georgia and Lebanon, other countries were highly resource-dependent. The Congo and Angola, for example, received almost half of their gross domestic product (GDP) from natural resources.

Overall, it is clear that the majority of countries struggle with most of the features known to increase the risk of civil war recurrence. Four factors are particularly prevalent: low income, the previous war involved more than one faction, conflict in the neighbourhood and a particularly intense previous war.

Allocation of international peace support

Since the 1990s, substantial international support has been provided to post-conflict societies, covering four areas of engagement: support to stabilisation and security, to politics and governance, to socio-economic foundations and to societal conflict transformation. Data on commitments of ODA to these issue areas, partly coded by the DIE project Supporting Sustainable Peace, reveals a large variance across these fields.

Support to socio-economic foundations includes finance-intensive activities such as infrastructure reconstruction, basic service delivery and macro-economic support. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that this area receives, by far, the largest share of ODA. During the period of up to five peace years after a civil war, countries received on average $85.50 per capita per year. Volumes tend to increase the longer a country has been at peace, with a relatively high level of support provided already early on.

Regarding support to stabilisation and security, including activities such as the demobilization of armed groups or demining, more than half of the post-conflict countries in these periods received less than $1. Another 10 cases received up to $3, whereas between $11 and $14.50 were spent on the four cases receiving the highest amounts. However, ODA figures only provide an incomplete picture of international support to security in post-conflict societies. Non-ODA contributions – in particular peacekeeping – can play an important role, too. In over two-thirds of the post-conflict periods, no peacekeeping forces were deployed. Of those cases where the international community intervened militarily, Guatemala represents the smallest deployment (with 132 troops in one year) and Bosnia-Herzegovina the largest (with a maximum of 60,000 troops).

Support for politics and governance – including areas such as elections, constitution-building, human rights and media support – varies strongly between recipients. Two-thirds receive $5 or less. At the same time, some have received very large amounts, such as Nicaragua ($43.80) and Bosnia-Herzegovina ($24). Support in this area does not clearly increase the longer a country is at peace. Instead, it remains at a similar level, with only interim fluctuations.

Hand-coded data on international support to societal conflict transformation reveals that this issue area receives the least international attention. Efforts to promote SCT after civil war, for example by establishing dialogue fora to overcome societal divisions, clearly require much lower financial amounts. Yet, even considering this, the area nevertheless appears to be almost neglected compared to the other issue areas: one-third of all cases received practically no ODA contributions to SCT within the first five years following a civil war. This level of neglect is unique to SCT. At the same time, even the highest amounts spent on SCT seem negligible compared to the volumes spent in other areas, with Liberia receiving the maximum of $1.64. Despite slight fluctuations, data on the first post-conflict decade shows no noticeable increase of commitments to SCT over time.

Box 1: Societal conflict transformation

Activities in this area aim to help societies in overcoming their violent past, reduce grievances and enable peaceful conflict resolution. Four dimensions are meant to support such a transformation into a peaceful society:

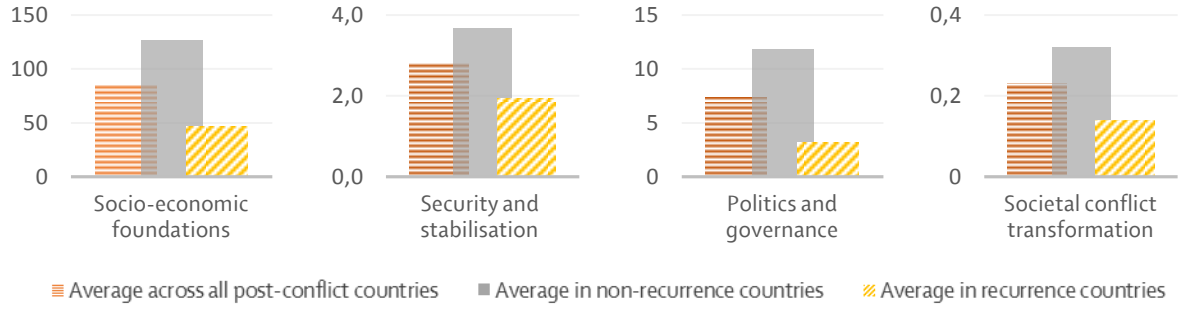
Truth	Justice	Victims	Reconciliation
Revelation of atrocities	Holding perpetrators accountable	Restitution of harms and losses	Overcoming societal divisions

Since no CRS code exists, data was hand-coded based on project information provided by AidData.

The amount received by individual countries varies significantly within each issue area. Several countries consistently receive considerably more than all others: using per capita per annum over the first five post-conflict years, Bosnia, Serbia + Kosovo (after 1999), Liberia (after 2004) and Nicaragua feature among the top recipients in all issue areas. No clear pattern emerges with regard to those cases receiving the least in each issue area. It is therefore not possible to identify clear "aid orphans", as no country is consistently neglected across all issue areas.

Comparing patterns of international support with incidents of civil war recurrence shows that those countries in which peace lasted received significantly more than average ODA within each issue area, whereas those that experienced recurrence received distinctly less (see Figure 1). In the area of politics and governance, for example, cases that did not experience recurrence received approximately 50 per cent more support than the annual average of $7.44, whereas cases that did experience recurrence received 60 per cent less.

Figure 1: Average ODA commitments in the four issue areas



Source: Authors (based on AidData)

More rigorous analyses are needed to corroborate this finding, which is not yet robust enough to draw strong conclusions. Yet, it supports the notion that substantive international support can make a difference with regard to preventing conflict recurrence.

Interestingly, the variation we see in ODA flows to recipients does not coincide with more favourable background conditions (e.g. high GDP, no conflict in the neighbourhood). Hence, the lower recurrence rate of countries receiving substantially more international support *cannot* be explained by international actors' reluctance to engage in highly demanding contexts.

Conclusion and recommendations

The fact that more than half of the cases that experienced a civil war remained stable shows that chances for peace exist and that donors should engage in post-conflict societies. Nevertheless, many post-conflict societies do experience civil war recurrence – in particular within the first few years after a war has ended. Therefore, the international community engaged in fostering peace after civil war needs to be aware of the high chances of relapse – not only to pay particular attention during that period, but also to prepare for the high likelihood of failure that statistics suggest.

The data suggests that substantial international support to building peace after civil war can help to reduce the risk of recurrence. Given that civil wars tend to recur, this insight indicates that becoming engaged in the aftermath of a conflict, though challenging, is potentially very impactful. Support to post-conflict societies is therefore sensible and worthwhile. The question for future research is how this support can be provided most effectively.

Societal conflict transformation clearly needs to receive closer attention. Given the high importance attributed to it by many practitioners and academics working on how to stabilise post-conflict societies, it comes as a surprise that support to SCT is practically being neglected. Engaging more strongly in this important issue area might be key to addressing the needs of those countries that have the most difficulties in building sustainable peace.

References

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