

PEACE BY 2030? THE REALITY OF COMPLEX VIOLENCE TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

The term ‘complex violence’ refers to conditions in which multiple, discrete and interactive forms of conflict and violence coexist in time and place—a common feature of many societies experiencing fragility. Complex violence can include civil and interstate war, organized crime, domestic political instability and social violence, and is produced and reinforced by a range of state, non-state and external actors. The challenges facing peacebuilders and those working to deliver development outcomes in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) era in these environments are further complicated by how these forms of violence interact. This brief introduces the concept and related key trends with the aims of developing a more robust interpretation of the multidimensionality of violence, exploring how research on complex violence can yield a more dynamic understanding of risk and threat for citizens and states.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Understanding complex violence involves a look at changing conflict dynamics. Violent actors can use different forms of violence to accomplish their objectives and often adapt due to changing power dynamics, conditions and norms. Violent outcomes can be manifestations of social, environmental or economic marginalization; political exclusion; competition politics; corruption or weak state–society relationships.

The means by which types of violence are categorized may be misleading, as the type of manifestation (e.g. war or terrorism) in two different situations may not be driven by the same underlying drivers. Unpacking the complexity of violence is an attempt to understand underlying conflict and power dynamics involving various stakeholders. This is not to suggest that complex violence is a new phenomenon—much of the complexity of violence today and its various manifestations have been used by violent actors for centuries.

The SDGs are linked to many causes of violence and fragility at different levels. SDG 16 has targets on violence but also corruption, inclusive decision-making, inequality, gender and others. Since many of the indicators reflecting components and drivers of complex violence are included in SDG 16, financial and technical support to monitor these indicators may help to measure and better understand the concept of complex violence.

As with other development activities, it is important that concepts and definitions are developed with local ownership if they are to be useful. While the concept of complex violence may be a useful one for unpacking types of violence, it will only be useful for better understanding conflict if it is understood and used by local actors grappling with the challenges of development and peacebuilding. There is a risk that terms like complex violence can be defined outside a conflict system and risk remaining ‘academic’ or ‘abstract’ if they do not reflect local knowledge. Likewise, the term ‘fragile state’ or ‘fragility’ has been found to be more confusing than enlightening at times. It is important to remember that complex violence and similar terms may have different meaning at different levels.

State capacity is central to the incidence of complex violence. While democratization may have contributed to a decrease in the incidence of interstate wars, local contests seem to have increased. State violence (by states against civilians) has also increased substantially in developing countries.

Complex violence risks being everything and nothing: Because the term is so broad, the meaning could change and measurement could be difficult. As an example, fragility rankings have had a similar evolution, as they have often become synonymous with conflict risk.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Policymakers must consider the complexity of violence and acknowledge the intricacies of violence before seeking quick fixes.

- Building inclusive governance may be more difficult in situations where complex violence is the product of political competition between elites for access to the very political systems that should be inclusive.
- Many emerging actors consider violence a strategic, effective tool and a legitimate mode of political competition, and have been rewarded for the use of armed force by achieving political or economic objectives. SDG 16 is a useful instrument for addressing the risks to civilians and communities from their real experience of violent competition.

2. The international community should invest in institutions that produce and use information on complex violence in the planning, implementation and monitoring of security and development interventions.

- The most promising avenue for addressing and mitigating violence is to build the capacity of local institutions and groups who aim to identify the source, extent and outcomes of political and social violence. Building their capacity to collect, code, store, manage and analyze conflict data in a systematic way is essential.
- In the context of SDG implementation, data collection and analysis on violence and conflict must involve partnerships with local and international research institutions (e.g. conflict observatories, homicide monitoring, human rights monitoring).
- Both national and locally-specific data are important for developing accurate situational analyses, understanding conflict dynamics and identifying discrete triggers. Useful data might include specific types of weapons used in violence; perpetrators' links to organized crime; ethnic, religious or communal targeting of victims; and specific strategies of intimidation around elections, collective organization or political participation.

3. Researchers of complex violence must perform and communicate in-depth stakeholder analyses.

Information about conflict stakeholders and the relationships between them is critical to understanding the complexity of violence in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Assessments should consider their motivation, history, funding sources, means, methods and limitations. This requires iterative and immersive consultations with local stakeholders.