

## IV. The state of violence and conflict in the age of the SDGs

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As the world enters the age of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), conflict and violence are changing. Conflict actors are adapting their goals and strategies to new circumstances, the targets of violence are becoming more varied and widespread, and the old strategies adopted to resolve or manage large-scale, high-intensity conflicts have often given rise to new, diverse and diffuse forms of violence.<sup>1</sup> As a reflection of the various ways in which people, communities, governments and states experience conflict today, the SDGs are concerned with the availability and sustainability of reliable, inclusive, social, environmental, economic and political institutions. The most direct reference to security is in SDG 16, which calls on the international community to: ‘promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of SDG 16 marks a shift in the international community’s commitment to peace, but the limited direct reference to conflict masks the widespread and persistent nature of sustained, active civil and transnational wars, domestic political instability and interpersonal violence.

Two issues require sustained attention. First, the underlying assumption of SDG 16 is that conflict and violence are manifestations of social, environmental and economic marginalization and political exclusion. There is mounting evidence to suggest, however, that much of the conflict and violence experienced today is a function of ‘competition’ politics, corruption and poor state-society relationships. Progress on SDG 16 can only be achieved if both the international community and national governments acknowledge the role of conflict in the politics of the developing world. Second, there is an ongoing need for consistent, systematic and comprehensive information gathering to reliably track variations in exposure, risk and harm due to conflict and violence across contexts and over time. Transparent and systematic collection of data on political and social violence is of paramount importance to addressing the vulnerability of citizens to violence.

This section explores what is known about the spectrum of conflict and violence at the adoption of the SDGs as it affects states, governments and citizens, emphasizing that conflict is complex, multidimensional, multi-agent and interactive. It describes the complex, changing, interactive and

<sup>1</sup> On the SDG agenda see chapter 9, section I, in this volume; on the opportunity costs of military spending in terms of achieving the SDGs see chapter 13, section IV, in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 Sep. 2015, A/RES/70/1, 21 Oct. 2015, p. 28.

networked characteristics of modern violence and concludes by suggesting some ways in which international and national actors can address these changing patterns.

### **Conflict is complex**

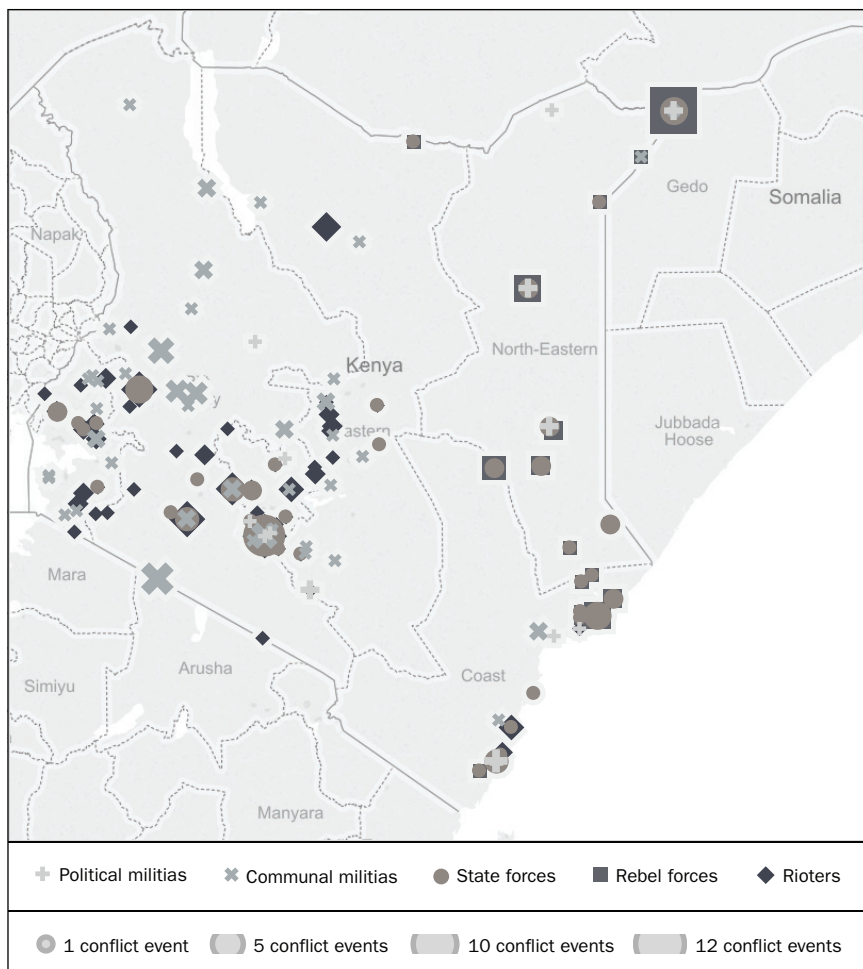
Conflict is complex and multidimensional. Violent conflict in the emerging age of the SDGs involves diverse actors, strategies and dynamics. Violent political conflict can be usefully distinguished according to a typology that differentiates between: civil and transnational wars, such as the violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; domestic political instability, the dominant pattern of violence in India; and criminal violence, such as that in Honduras. Types of conflict are differentiated by characteristics such as the nature of the actors, its form, goals and objectives, the intensity and its consequences. The dynamics of conflict are also shaped by the ability of groups and communities to coordinate and organize at the local level, strategies of local governance and state responses to violent challenges.

Many underlying drivers can lead to different manifestations of conflict. For example, conditions of inequality and associated communal grievances surrounding economic, political or social marginalization may be common to multiple communities within a state. However, the precise ways in which collective action is mobilized, whether it involves the use of violence and the extent to which it poses a serious challenge to state authority will vary in accordance with the mobilization capacity of the community in question. Such capacity depends on its size and ability to mount a feasible collective challenge, the relationship between groups and the associated elites, the relationship with the state or regime and past histories of violent conflict as a strategy for political negotiation—either within a particular community or region, or in the practice of politics more generally in a country. In turn, the impacts of conflict and violence can vary in relation to the political consequences and social costs.

Countries often face several concurrent risks and threats from multiple manifestations of political and social violence. Multiple types of violence often co-occur within the same country, perpetrated by a proliferation of discrete violent actors, but often operating in distinct spatial clusters.<sup>3</sup>

For example, figure 6.8 illustrates the geographic distribution of political conflict and violent rioting across Kenya in 2015, and depicts a clear clustering of discrete violent actors. Rebel forces, typically involving Somalia's al-Shabab, and more rarely Ethiopian rebel forces, are clustered in the north-centre, north-east and coast of the country, close to the borders with

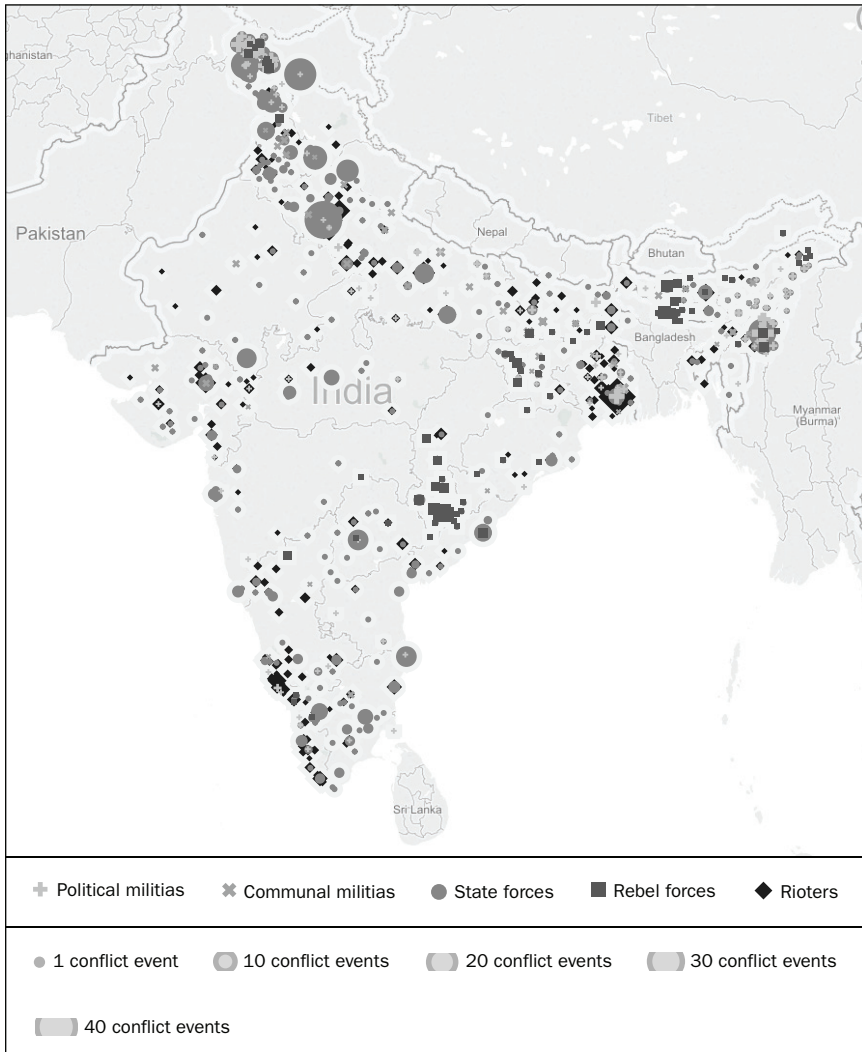
<sup>3</sup> Raleigh, C., 'Political hierarchies and landscapes of conflict across Africa', *Political Geography*, vol. 42, (Aug. 2014), pp. 91–102.



**Figure 6.8.** Violent conflict and rioting by conflict actor type, Kenya 2015

Source: ACLED, Version 6, 2016, <[www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com)>.

Somalia and Ethiopia, and in communities which have historical links with political separatist movements and cross-national identity groups. Both the political militias and the rioters are more evenly distributed throughout the country, but with a concentration in the central region, in particular in Nairobi and nearby urban centres. Communal militias are also heavily clustered in the former Rift Valley Province and throughout the north-west of the country. Finally, state forces have their own unique conflict footprint. Their activity predictably overlaps considerably with that of the rebel forces, owing to the political, military and strategic significance of these non-state actors, but they are notably much less active in the regions of the far north

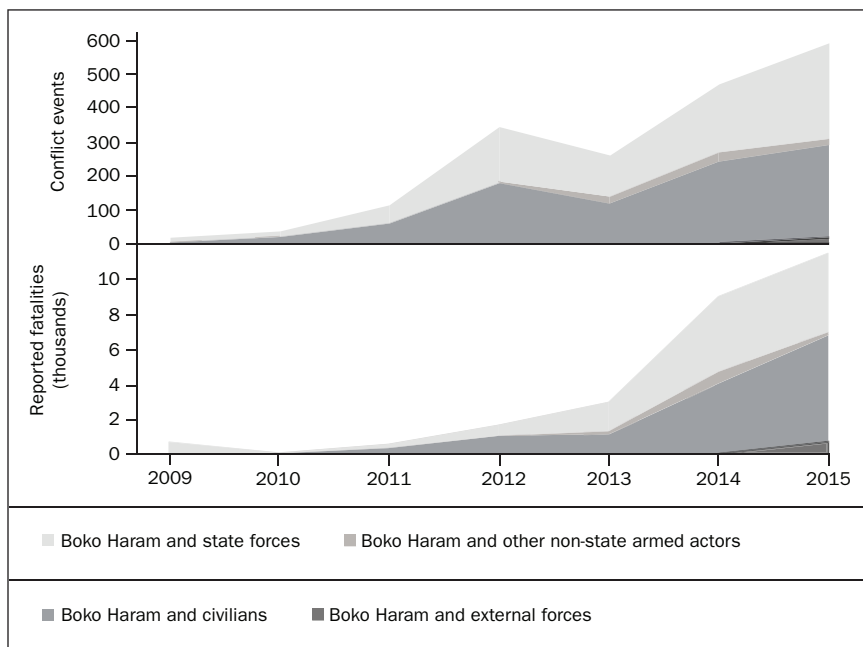


**Figure 6.9.** Violent conflict and rioting events by conflict actor type, India 2015

Source: ACLED, Asia Version 1, 2016, <[www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com)>.

and north-west of the country, the location of considerable communal violence, suggesting a distinct state footprint in those regions.

A similar degree of subnational variation with discrete features is evident in the case of India (see figure 6.9). Again, there is a clear concentration of rioters and political militias in urban spaces; and an uneven distribution of state forces throughout the country, with a clear clustering in the north-west near the border with Pakistan and also in urban areas. Rebel violence



**Figure 6.10.** Violent events and reported fatalities attributed to Boko Haram, 2009–15

Source: ACLED, Version 6, 2016, <[www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com)>.

also has a distinct geographic footprint, concentrated along the peripheral and border regions of the north and east.

This subnational variation in conflict represents the complex and highly localized dynamics of violence, as well as the political power and authority relationships between central regimes and subnational spaces. Both are of critical importance to understanding the characteristics of violence and conflict in the emerging age of the SDGs. In the pursuit and promotion of just, peaceful and inclusive societies, it will be imperative to understand that security and insecurity, violence and peace manifest themselves differently across and within states. Civilians are vulnerable to myriad violent threats, which may or may not be well-correlated to the security priorities of states and regimes, and in some instances might directly implicate those forces. Furthermore, typical definitions of political violence have neglected the multiple forms of conflict perpetuated at the local level, which often involve state forces. While these local level forms of violence are often less lethal than events that occur within the confines of a civil or transnational war, the persistent and widespread nature of these threats means that they occur more frequently and exert a significant toll on communities.

In addition to illustrating variation, the multiple and complex forms of violence present in a single state reveal the interrelationships between dif-

ferent forms of violence. Research shows, for example, that the phenomena of terrorism and civil war are interrelated, and that typically the former closely follows the latter.<sup>4</sup>

This is evident in case studies of particular groups too. For example, the Nigerian Islamist group known widely as ‘Boko Haram’ established itself in areas already affected by high levels of political violence, but initially only as a political militia. The group evolved into a large-scale insurgency and rebel movement seeking to overthrow the state after several years of activity.<sup>5</sup> In the early period of Boko Haram activity, the group primarily engaged with state forces: interaction between these two actors constituted just under 80 per cent of the events attributed to Boko Haram in 2009. Following the July 2009 uprising, in which several hundred people were killed, subsequent early Boko Haram violence typically involved low-intensity and sporadic attacks, often involving drive-by shootings. Of these, attacks on civilians attributed to the group were often perpetrated against representatives of, or those aligned with, state forces, such as off-duty or retired police officers.<sup>6</sup>

These dynamics shifted dramatically in the following years, and 2012 was a year of rapid and marked geographic expansion of Boko Haram’s reach across Nigeria. This was followed by increased engagement not only with other non-state armed groups, but also with civilians, culminating in the series of high-profile and extremely high-intensity attacks on non-combatants which continue today. In 2015, attacks on civilians made up just under half (46 per cent) of all violent events attributed to Boko Haram; and over half (53 per cent) of associated reported fatalities (see figure 6.10).

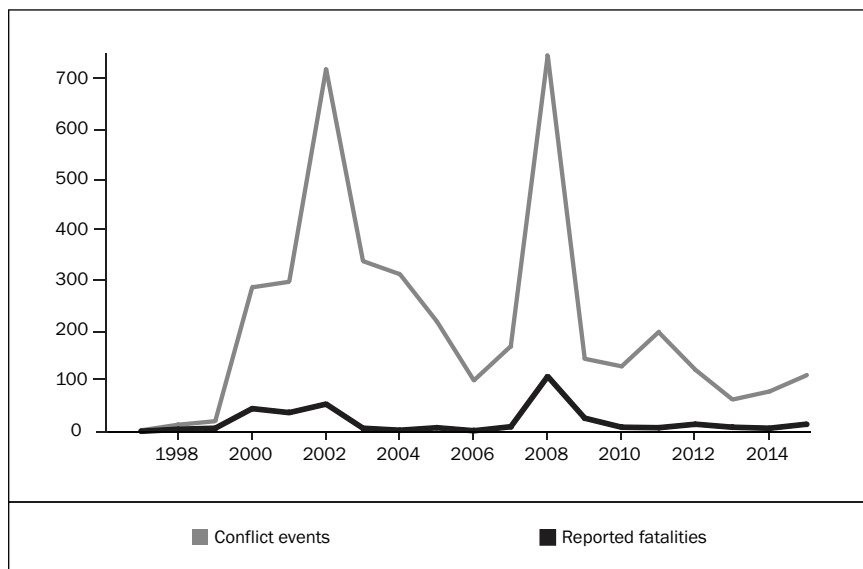
Over time, Boko Haram’s tactics also evolved to include the strategic seizure of territory, and the escalating use of remote violence strategies such as improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers. Throughout this period, there was also a disparity in the subnational use of different tactics and strategies, with a concentration on territorial seizure in the north-east of the country, and more sporadic, if high-intensity, attacks throughout the wider north. This evolution of tactics, as well as the contemporaneous but geographically varied disparity in local violent tactics, often prevents a clear distinction being made between conventional conceptions of ‘terrorism’ and other modes of violence in a given conflict.

The strategies and dynamics of violence differ by group, location and goal, and even similar forms of violence have particular political, social, economic

<sup>4</sup> Findley, M. and Young, J., ‘Terrorism and civil war: a spatial and temporal approach to a conceptual problem’, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2 (June 2012), pp. 285–305.

<sup>5</sup> Dowd, C., ‘Grievances, governance and Islamist violence in sub-Saharan Africa’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 53, no. 4 (Nov. 2015), pp. 505–31.

<sup>6</sup> See ACLED Version 6, 2016. Violent events involving Boko Haram in 2010 resulted in an average of 2.02 reported fatalities per event, compared to an average of 4.6 reported fatalities per attributed violent event in 2011. Of the 37 recorded events involving Boko Haram in 2010, 27 (or 73%) involved 1 or no fatalities; this share dropped to 61 out of 117 recorded violent events, or 52%, in 2011.



**Figure 6.11.** Conflict events and reported fatalities in Zimbabwe, 1997–2015

Source: ACLED, Version 6, 2016, <[www.acledata.com](http://www.acledata.com)>.

and humanitarian consequences and outcomes. For example, in 2015 the levels of violence in Burundi were relatively low compared to other active conflicts in the region and on the continent. However, this relatively short campaign of violence that began in April 2015 has had a dramatic effect on displacement and migration. As of January 2016, over 230 000 people had fled the country and a further 15 000 were reported to have been internally displaced.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while typical measures of conflict intensity—such as reported fatalities—may be similar across conflict contexts, the effects can vary significantly, depending on histories of violence, displacement, community resilience and coping strategies. Frameworks and policies aimed at creating peaceful, just and inclusive societies require robust conflict analyses that fully encapsulate the differential impacts and implications of conflict and violence for human security and civilian vulnerability. Better efforts to support impartial local monitoring and reporting of political violence will allow communities to accurately and systematically address their experiences of insecurity and violence, even outside of typical civil war experiences.

The international community's focus on large-scale conventional measures, such as reported fatalities, can obscure other dimensions of a conflict, such as the tactical use of violence for strategic purposes, and the differ-

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 'Burundi: humanitarian snapshot', 14 Jan. 2016.

ential impact and consequences of similar forms of violence. For example, recorded violence in Zimbabwe indicates that fatal violence is very rarely used in political intimidation (see figure 6.11). Beatings and non-fatal violence are much more common and a deliberate tactic by state and regime party forces as this lower-intensity violence draws less attention and sustains a facade of stability, which would be undermined by high-levels of fatal violence. The choice to limit fatal violence is a strategic one and central to the conflict dynamics of the context—a feature that is concealed by measures of fatalities alone.

### **Conflict is changing**

While recent scholarly work suggests a decline in rates of violence generally, such conclusions are driven by the fact that violent interstate conflict and civil wars are now more rare.<sup>8</sup> However, when the multiple forms of political violence are considered, the rate of conflict occurrence has risen and changed over the past two decades. The rate of domestic conflict has become more volatile, but exhibits repeated and persistent patterns. Specifically, domestic political instability has largely replaced civil and international wars.<sup>9</sup> In association with these broader trends, rural violence campaigns have decreased while urban violence, in particular urban modalities of contest and violent competition between elites, has increased.<sup>10</sup> In line with changing elites, some of the actors in the violence have also shifted: militia organizations that operate at the behest of political elites perpetrate a large proportion of modern domestic instability.<sup>11</sup> These groups often engage in crime and social violence when not working for elites and their political interests.

The forms of conflict that emerge within states are closely tied to the national political institutions and the relationship between groups and governments. Hence, as government structures and institutions shift towards or away from democracy, decentralization and devolution, there is a concomitant shift in the modalities of, and strategies and actors in, conflict. These shifts are closely tied to the relationship between the checks and balances

<sup>8</sup> Pinker, S., *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (Penguin Books: London, 2012); and Straus, S., 'Wars do end! Changing patterns of political violence in sub-Saharan Africa', *African Affairs*, vol. 111, no. 443 (Mar. 2012), pp. 179–201. See also section III in this chapter on the reversal of peace.

<sup>9</sup> Raleigh, C., 'Pragmatic and promiscuous: Explaining the rise of competitive political militias across Africa', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 60, no. 2 (Mar. 2016), pp. 283–310.

<sup>10</sup> Raleigh, C., 'Urban violence patterns across African states', *International Studies Review*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Mar. 2015), pp. 90–106.

<sup>11</sup> Raleigh (note 9).



on the executive branch and the arena for possible political participation in society by citizens.<sup>12</sup>

The political settlement framework has emerged as a useful heuristic for interpreting the persistence of violence surrounding political change and competition. This lens often emphasizes the effects of political exclusion on conflict. However, as reflected in the rise of competitive political militias, political competition over the terms of political *inclusion* is another feature of conflict and violence in the modern era. 'Inclusion' is a political and contested process, leading to violence in cases where elites contest and compete over limited government positions and resources.<sup>13</sup>

In seeking to understand, mitigate, manage and resolve conflict in the emerging SDG age, policies and frameworks should begin from recognition of the *political* nature of conflict, and endeavour to anticipate the unintended or unforeseen consequences of approaches that rely on inclusive political settlements. If inclusion in political settlements is negotiated or secured through the use of violence by elites seeking to secure or improve their position, there are multiple risks associated with this approach. These include potentially legitimizing and institutionalizing the use of violence as a bargaining tool in political negotiations; silencing or marginalizing stakeholders outside the conflict arena; and, where underlying drivers of violence have not been addressed, the transformation of conflict into new and diverse forms.

### **Conflict is interactive and networked**

There is now a greater awareness of transnational conflict escalation, as well as the transnational nature of conflict actors and management or resolution systems. The transnational linkages between armed groups, shared ideologies and intergovernmental responses to conflict suggest that groups and governments increasingly collaborate and cooperate to further both domestic and international goals. Contemporary conflict is transnationalized through: (a) regional conflict dynamics, with neighbouring countries affected by domestic instability and, in turn, often intervening in conflict nationally; (b) linkages between regimes and non-state groups, including across borders; and (c) extra-territoriality, for example, with violent Islamist groups linked to both neighbouring groups and those further afield, and through flows of financial, logistical and troop resources around the world.

<sup>12</sup> Choi, H. J. and Raleigh, C., 'Dominant forms of conflict in changing political systems', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 1 (Mar. 2015), pp. 158–71.

<sup>13</sup> de Waal, A., *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Polity: London, 2015).

Conflict management responses are also transnationalized by neighbouring, regional and international state interventions in conflict, as well as intergovernmental peacekeeping and conflict resolution responses, and increasing donor government attention on the challenges of conflict, security and peacebuilding in fragile contexts. Many of these dynamics are enduring. Prominent historical conflicts such as those in the Great Lakes region of Africa, Sierra Leone and Liberia; and Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, for example, have long been shaped by regional conflict systems. However, greater interconnectivity between conflict actors, the targeting of attacks far from the original locations of conflict, and the far-reaching consequences of conflict, including refugee flows, have prompted a renewed focus on global insecurity in the modern age.

Smaller scale social and political violence can also co-occur and be intertwined. In extreme cases, social violence is dependent on investment by and the entrenchment of political actors, including the active co-opting of government to create spaces to engage in organized crime. In these ways, violence becomes institutionalized, weakening political institutions while requiring a political-institutional response. The local manifestations of this—such as insecure communities and high murder rates—require a response that is perceived as legitimate, accountable and effective.

### **Ways forward**

This section has reviewed how conflict patterns and modalities have changed, while explanations and policies are often still shaped by impressions of dyadic, insurgent conflict, exclusionary politics and containment. A key first step towards improving the international response to conflict risks and consequences would be to begin by identifying the issues through a robust conflict analysis. This would need to address how the political context generates and exacerbates incentives for violence within both ‘wartime’ and ‘peacetime’ political economies.

Larger changes in how states operate, and how citizens experience governance, are fuelling political violence. The provision of security, justice and public goods has become a function of politicized processes in which whole communities can be disenfranchised, repressed or marginalized. A breakdown or intentional retraction in the ability of a state to provide services corresponds to the advent of security as a selective service rather than a common good. Access to security in these circumstances is increasingly defined by group membership. Gangs and militias who operate as supplemental security/control providers are themselves a symptom of the lack of security provision in many modern developing states. These illegal organizations engage in protection activities within ethnic communities (or clubs),

but citizens outside of the select ethnic/regional/party groups are subject to predatory or repressive behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

Many new actors consider violence to be a strategic and effective tool and mode of political competition, and are rewarded for engaging in armed force. SDG 16 provides an opportunity to accurately address the risks to civilians and communities from their real experience of violent competition. It is the responsibility of the international community to fully and honestly identify and address these threats.

The most promising avenue for addressing and mitigating violence is to bolster the authority and power of local institutions and groups that aim to accurately identify the source, extent and outcomes of political and social violence. Data collection on violence and conflict in the emerging age of the SDGs must involve partnerships with the local institutions and groups collecting data on violence (conflict observatories, homicide monitoring, human rights monitoring etc.) and building their capacity to collect, code, store, manage and analyse conflict data in a systematic way. These institutions and groups will then be able to inform policy, lobby, campaign and conduct conflict mitigation and management programming and projects. Many organizations are already doing this, which provides multiple opportunities to support, coordinate and expand these efforts.

Another direction for future research and policy involves supporting local institutions to collect data that is both cross-nationally comparable and locally specific, and acknowledges the degree to which violence and conflict are situational and have discrete triggers and different consequences across contexts. This may require identifying key variables or indicators that are measured across all local institutions, such as the dates, actors involved and location of the violence, coupled with locally designed and implemented measures that reflect the specific ways in which communities define conflict, security, justice, peace and inclusivity (SDG 16). Such an approach might include collecting data on the specific types of weapons used in violence, perpetrators' links to organized crime, the ethnic, religious or communal targeting of victims and specific strategies of intimidation around elections and collective organization or political participation. Collecting multiple types of data will ensure that the information gathered is: (a) useful for comparative analysis and global tracking of progress towards achieving SDG 16; (b) locally defined, relevant and applicable to contexts in which the specific dynamics and strategies of violence vary; and (c) effective in shaping the degree to which people feel their society is just, peaceful and inclusive.

<sup>14</sup> Guichaoua, Y., 'How do ethnic militias perpetuate in Nigeria? A micro-level perspective on the Oodua People's Congress', *World Development*, vol. 38, no. 11 (Apr. 2010), pp. 1657–66.