

CHAPTER

4

Unearthing the human dimension of violent conflict

Unearthing the human dimension of violent conflict

Reducing violence everywhere and in all its forms is a prerequisite for human security and a core target of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹ Violent conflicts and interpersonal violence are direct threats to people's physical integrity. Before the Covid-19 pandemic 100 civilians a day were killed in armed conflict, and more than 12 times as many—1,205 people a day—were victims of homicide.² And the ongoing pandemic seems to have sparked increased intrahousehold violence³ and political violence.⁴ But the pathways from reducing violence to freedom from fear and anxiety, freedom from war and freedom from indignity extend well beyond ensuring physical safety. Being exposed to violence, directly and indirectly, is detrimental to wellbeing and human development more broadly. Conflict and violence can drive people from their homes, potentially exposing them to further security threats in their quest for safety.⁵ But fear of violence also restricts people's use of public spaces,⁶ limiting their agency and full participation in society. Furthermore, feeling safe is an integral part of Sustainable Development Goal 16.⁷

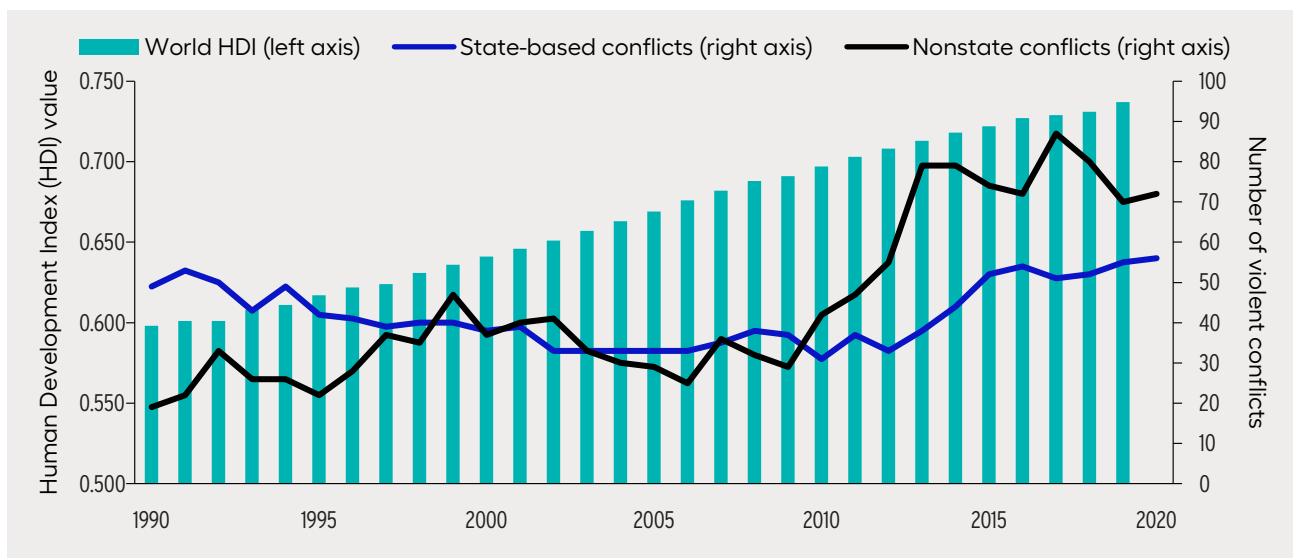
Today, conflict levels are up, and although violent conflicts are seemingly less deadly than in the past, they are spreading across countries and Human Development Index (HDI) groups. More people in more places are experiencing some kind of conflict, and, as seen in chapter 1, a majority of the global population feels insecure, often due to threats of violence. This

chapter centres conflict analysis on people, rather than on the contestations, to spotlight the human dimensions of violent conflict. Taking well-established conflict definitions as a starting point, it expands the analysis to compounding human security threats and people living in conflict-affected areas. Rather than give a full account of violent conflict, it shows how the new generation of human security—based on protection, empowerment and solidarity—can shed light on blindspots and support the building of just and peaceful societies.

Systemic interaction of conflict with threats to human security calls for systemic responses

Wars, violent conflict between armed groups, violence, crime and unrest have often been thought of as problems of development. One implication was that economic growth would ease conflict and expand peace. But as the joint United Nations–World Bank report *Pathways for Peace* argues, recent trends have placed this hypothesis in doubt.⁸ Emerging now is a development-with-insecurity trend, where violent conflicts increase in parallel with progress in human development (figure 4.1). Violent conflicts also seem to be spreading to higher HDI countries⁹ and to increasingly consist of contestations between armed groups—so called nonstate conflicts.¹⁰

Figure 4.1 Violent conflict is increasing in parallel with progress in human development



Source: Human Development Report Office based on Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset version 21.1 and Uppsala Conflict Data Program Non-State Conflict Dataset version 21.1.

What is driving this trend? This Report argues that the Anthropocene context presents a new reality in which human security threats play out. In this setting a mechanistic security–development relationship cannot be taken for granted. Planetary disruptions interact with conflict dynamics, inequalities and technological innovation to create new arenas for conflict and violence. None of the new generation of human security threats on its own is enough to explain why violent conflict is on the rise—but in their interaction tensions multiply and build.

“Emerging now is a development-with-insecurity trend, where violent conflicts increase in parallel with progress in human development

The development–security disconnect may be a by-product of how development has been pursued, compounded by the legacy of historical injustices, including colonial rule. Development has not delivered benefits to all people—and in some cases has left groups behind.¹¹ The development approaches that have given most attention to economic growth and considerably less to equitable human development have led to stark and growing inequalities, as well as mounting pressures on the planet.¹² As seen below, in the Anthropocene context risks may heighten conflict tensions, and conflicts are closely linked to horizontal inequalities, the concentration of political and economic power among a few and the exclusion of many.

Human security in this context requires considering how overlapping threats interact and calls for systemic responses that adapt to changing circumstances.¹³ Insights from complexity theory can help formulate systemic and adaptive approaches to sustaining peace (box 4.1).

Violent conflict hinders solidarity and trust

Chapter 1 argues for introducing solidarity into the human security frame and shows how in today’s world higher impersonal trust may help foster solidarity. This is particularly pertinent because many of the new human security threats span borders and their drivers lie beyond the control of a single actor. With fighting spilling across borders, wars driving forced displacement and organized crime spreading

through transnational illicit networks,¹⁴ no country is immune to conflict and its devastation. When conflict triggers and human security threats are potentially global, peace also becomes an international and interlinked aspiration. Confronting the interconnected challenges that build conflict tensions and sustain peace in an era of compounding threats thus requires a sense of solidarity, as defined in chapter 1.

Festering fears and anxieties strain social contracts, in part by fuelling polarization and deepening societal divides.¹⁵ Leaders interested in mobilizing groups into violence can politicize societal divides¹⁶ or advance agendas that harm democratic institutions and norms.¹⁷ Recent years have witnessed violations of international norms and human rights and oppression of civil liberties, even outside fragile and conflict settings.¹⁸ Human rights defenders and environmental activists have become increasingly under attack, a potential strategy to silence protest and political opponents.¹⁹ Indeed, the targeted killings of a few can incite fears among many, curtailing agency and collective action.

The targeted killings of environmental activists may be one of the most abysmal symptoms of the interactions among risks, inequalities and violence. The very people that are pushing for easing planetary pressures are often persecuted, furthering dangerous planetary changes that correspond to existential threats comparable to the nuclear threat.²⁰ In the Anthropocene context people’s choices result in pressures on the planet that are destroying the biosphere foundations on which societies depend. In the case of nuclear weapons, and other weapons of mass destruction, the threat of extinction is evident. Today’s nuclear risks are at their highest in the past four decades.²¹ Risks related to technical malfunction, illicit trade, human error, volatile geopolitics and arms races can trigger negative human insecurity spirals.

When countries see the need to divert ever more resources towards protection and security, investments in human development that enhance agency and empowerment or ease planetary pressures may be postponed or never materialize. The world’s military spending reached its highest level since the end of the Cold War—almost \$2 trillion in 2020.²² As the public health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic turned into a socioeconomic crisis threatening human development progress everywhere, official

Box 4.1 Adaptive peacebuilding: Insights from complexity theory for strengthening the resilience and sustainability of social-ecological systems

Complexity theory offers new ways of understanding how social-ecological systems function under pressure—for example, how climate change–related stressors may exacerbate competition over scarce resources—and provides a theoretical framework for understanding how the resilience and adaptive capacity of social systems can be influenced to help them prevent, contain and recover from violent conflict.

As experiences in Afghanistan and elsewhere have demonstrated, it is not possible to undertake a project—for example, a community violence reduction initiative in Iraq or security sector reform in Somalia—and predict the outcome with any certainty. Nor can a model that has performed relatively well—such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa—be used elsewhere and be expected to produce the same result. This uncertainty and irreproducibility are characteristics of complex systems, not the result of insufficient knowledge or inadequate planning or implementation. Adaptive peacebuilding is specifically designed to cope with the uncertainty, unpredictability and irreproducibility inherent in complex social change processes. It is an approach where peacebuilders, together with the people affected by conflict, actively engage in an iterative process of inductive learning and adaptation.

Insights derived from how self-organization maintains and transforms complex systems suggest that for peace to become self-sustainable, resilient social institutions that promote and preserve peace need to emerge from within the culture, history and social-ecological context of the relevant society. A society is peaceful when its institutions can ensure that political and economic competition is managed without people resorting to violence to pursue their interests. For peace to be self-sustainable, a society thus needs sufficiently robust social institutions to identify, channel and manage disputes peacefully.

Peacebuilders can assist in this process, but if they interfere too much, they could cause harm by

disrupting the feedback critical for self-organization to emerge and be sustained. Every time an external intervention solves a problem, it interrupts the internal feedback process. The result may be a missed opportunity to stimulate the development of self-organization and resilience. For example, the more effective an international operation is in stabilizing a situation, the less incentive there is for political elites to invest in the political settlements needed to bring about self-sustainable peace. Understanding this tension—and the constraints it poses on international agency—helps explain why some policy initiatives may have interfered so much that they ended up undermining the ability of societies to self-organize. The weight typically assigned to international expertise versus local and indigenous knowledge needs to shift. The key to successful peacebuilding lies in finding the appropriate balance between external facilitation and local self-organization, which will differ by context.

An adaptive peacebuilding approach does not imply that expert or scientific knowledge is not important but that understanding how to implement evidence-based advice in a specific social context matters too. For example, the science may determine that avoiding close contact between people prevents the spread of Covid-19, but in a densely populated slum community that can be achieved only through adaptive practice and learning in partnership and collaboration with that community. The empowered agency of the people involved is critical for the effectiveness and sustainability of any peacebuilding initiative.

Adaptive peacebuilding is thus a normative and functional approach to conflict prevention and resolution that aims to navigate the complexity inherent in nudging social-ecological change processes towards sustaining peace, without causing harm.

Source: Cedric de Coning based on de Coning (2018).

development assistance also rose to a record in 2020—but still amounted to less than 10 percent of military spending.²³ Furthermore, a substantial portion of official development assistance is needed to alleviate immediate humanitarian crises, as seen during the ongoing pandemic, leaving less room for conflict

resolution or transformation of underlying conflict drivers. Today, military spending is 2.4 percent of global GDP,²⁴ whereas protection against a deteriorating environment—which in the Anthropocene context may become one of the greatest human security threats—is much lower. For example, EU countries

spent an average 0.8 percent of GDP on environmental protection in 2019.²⁵

As military spending has increased, so has the proliferation of arms. The global stock of firearms has been growing over the past decade, to more than 1 billion today.²⁶ Military holdings account for 13 percent of all firearm holdings, and the vast majority of guns are in civilian hands.²⁷ However, private security solutions, such as acquiring a gun for protection, can increase human insecurity. For example, the proliferation of small arms in four communities in South Asia has increased fear, anxiety, suspicion and insecurity.²⁸ The UN Secretary-General outlined a new agenda for disarmament in 2018. With increasingly complex and protracted conflicts, rapid technological development and persistent nuclear threats, the agenda calls for governments to accelerate disarmament at both the community and national levels.

Yet several major official development assistance donors are also among the world's top arms exporters, and progress on internationally agreed disarmament commitments has been slow,²⁹ indicating the prevalence of protectionist concerns over global solidarity and low trust at the global level. There is an urgent need to address the trust deficit to reconcile communities affected by violence as well as to reduce polarization and ease conflict tensions outside direct conflict and postconflict zones.

In postconflict settings truth and reconciliation programmes may support reconstruction, while increasing intergroup contacts outside political settings show promise in generating trust and tolerance.³⁰ Still, the unintended effects of such actions require careful attention, as they have been linked to post-traumatic stress and other adverse results.³¹ Without a broader process of accountability, safeguarding of human rights and ending of impunity for human rights violations, conflict-related violence can take new forms,³² and resentment and distrust may linger in social and political institutions, creating latent conflict tensions.

Accountability and a global commitment to peace are key

Accountability and honouring commitments to peace have emerged as key components for

fostering trust and solidarity. But because longstanding violent conflicts between nonstate actors and perpetual violence from organized crime make up an increasing share of the violent conflict landscape today,³³ questions about leadership and ensuring accountability arise. Scholars are increasingly pointing to how criminal governance regimes become embedded in state power, often as a result of coercion.³⁴ For example, research has shown that cartels in Mexico attack elected officials and political candidates to establish control over local territories.³⁵ When organized crime, local gangs or armed groups assume state-like functions of governing, ensuring protection and enforcing rules over the local community, the state monopoly of violence is threatened, and justice systems fail to protect citizens.³⁶ During the Covid-19 pandemic criminal organizations have used the public health crisis to expand their influence—by, for example, enforcing social distancing or distributing goods to local populations.³⁷ Similar questions of human rights and accountability are raised in relation to the growing number of people forcibly displaced by conflicts and the use of autonomous systems and artificial intelligence in warfare.

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The current multilateral system, built in part to save future generations from the scourge of war, sees its institutions evolving to face new conflict threats.³⁸ The triple-nexus humanitarian-development-peace approach indicates not only the importance of physical safety but also a minimum threshold of economic, social, political and cultural freedoms in promoting a peaceful and just future for all. Institutional innovations in the climate-security space³⁹ and in expanding the set of voices at the peacebuilding table—including the Youth Peace and Security Agenda,⁴⁰ the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on gender-responsive peacebuilding⁴¹ and recent UN Security Council discussions on new and emerging technologies—show how the concept of security is broadening in the multilateral space.

Multilateral peacebuilding balances humanitarianism with long-term development efforts. Its effectiveness can be enhanced by international commitments to advance human security and human rights—to protecting civilians in conflict, empowering historically marginalized groups and communities or easing planetary pressures. Calls for networked multilateralism stress the responsibility of all social actors to uphold human rights.⁴² Commitments to internationally agreed conventions on human rights and to peace also advance the integrated and indivisible 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In fact, committing to peace is not only a moral obligation—it also makes economic sense. Investing \$1 in conflict prevention today can save up to \$16 in the future.⁴³ Conversely, the economic cost of conflict and violence was estimated to be 10.5 percent of global GDP in 2019.⁴⁴ Worryingly, global trends seem to point towards slow progress on disarmament and multilateralism.⁴⁵

Agency connects empowerment and protection for peaceful lives

The emphasis on empowerment in the context of human security also implies empowering people to act for peace. Empowering people to act for peace is key in the current setting, with a conflict landscape that increasingly comprises protracted conflicts with a wide array of actors and in which consequences spill across national boundaries.⁴⁶ The last section of the chapter argues that centring conflict analysis and peacebuilding on people unearths commonly overlooked dimensions of conflict and peace and may provide a way of empowering people to become change-agents for peace.

Identifying, supporting and amplifying the efforts of the principal agents of change at the local, national, regional and global levels are critical, as is finding platforms for constructive dialogue. Doing so also requires changing pervasive social norms and power hierarchies that limit the agency and voice of historically marginalized groups. For example, including women in peace processes can improve the likelihood of sustainable peace agreements.⁴⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security calls on all actors to incorporate gender perspectives and enhance women's role in peacebuilding.⁴⁸

Empowerment-focused efforts to address conflict risks need to protect those at risk of victimization while holding to account those perpetuating violence and violating human rights. So, systemic approaches are important not only to reduce conflict tensions and risks at a macro scale but also to prevent violent behaviours at the individual level.⁴⁹ Being exposed to violence at a young age can desensitize children and increase their likelihood of accepting and perpetuating violent behaviour.⁵⁰ Lack of economic opportunities can reduce the opportunity costs of engaging in violence,⁵¹ whereas inequalities and exclusion can create grievances that can be instrumentalized by political actors to foster conflict.⁵²

The dynamics of violent conflict are evolving under the new generation of human security threats

Human security strategies based on the pursuit of protection, empowerment and solidarity can complement current approaches of addressing violent conflict. This is particularly pertinent in the current context—whether for the turmoil in Afghanistan, the future of reconciliation with indigenous peoples and First Nations in Canada or the transition measures for supporting people and places in managing large-scale transformations to ease planetary pressures.

“Conventional security policies would be enhanced by systematically considering how overlapping human security threats create tensions and compound conflict risks

Conflict is becoming more complex, internationalized, multidimensional and fragmented, involving more types of actors and persisting longer. A development-with-insecurity trend is emerging (see figure 4.1). Conventional security policies would be enhanced by systematically considering how overlapping human security threats create tensions and compound conflict risks. Similarly, development approaches that fail to account for planetary pressures and inequalities risk further aggravating human security threats. The following discussion illustrates how the new generation of human security threats interact with evolving conflict dynamics. By no means exhaustive, this overview shows how the intersections

warrant careful attention, as they may open new arenas for addressing conflict risks.

Conflict risks are exacerbated in the Anthropocene context; climate change is a threat multiplier

As chapter 2 shows, a changing climate is one feature of the Anthropocene context. Land and ocean ecosystems, as well as the services they provide to humans, are changing because of human-induced climate change, and biodiversity loss is rampant, further eroding ecosystem resilience⁵³ and harming human health, livelihoods and wellbeing.⁵⁴ While there is still an ongoing discussion on the direct climate–conflict link, a large body of research identifies several pathways between the two,⁵⁵ highlighting how the Anthropocene context interplays with conflict dynamics. This calls for a broader conceptualization of human-ecological (in)security that captures the systemic and volatile nature of the Anthropocene.⁵⁶ Conflict can also exacerbate environmental degradation, leading researchers to point to possible “vicious vulnerability and climate traps.”⁵⁷ Conflicts are ultimately related to social imbalances: horizontal inequality, power hierarchies and political interests that seem to contribute more to environmental conflicts than the direct effects of deteriorations in the environment or access to natural resources do.⁵⁸

Climate change disproportionately affects countries already experiencing armed conflict. At the end of 2020, 10 of 21 ongoing UN peace operations were in countries most exposed to climate change.⁵⁹ While this is due to geographic location, armed conflict increases the difficulties in managing and adapting to climate change and may even exacerbate environmental degradation. Conflict weakens government institutions and diverts attention from sustainable development to military concerns. Global military spending is increasing,⁶⁰ alongside the military carbon footprint.⁶¹ Conflict operations may also directly hurt the natural environment. For example, attacks on physical infrastructure can lead to oil spills, fires and higher carbon dioxide emissions.⁶² Indeed, by one estimate, the Gulf War contributed to more than 2 percent of global fossil fuel emissions in 1991.⁶³ And more recent research shows how agricultural lands were captured and destroyed by all sides in the Syrian

war.⁶⁴ Conflict is also a predictor of declines in wildlife populations, which hurts biodiversity.⁶⁵

“Climate change disproportionately affects countries already experiencing armed conflict

A transition to a low-carbon economy is critical to curbing climate change, yet conflict may result in barriers to much needed energy transitions and lock in outdated polluting technologies.⁶⁶ The phasing out of outdated technologies and shifting from fossil fuel to renewable technologies also comes with transition risks, which, if not carefully managed, can slow the shift and even increase conflict.⁶⁷ Some regions and groups are better equipped to benefit from new opportunities in low-carbon economies, while others stand to lose out if no measures are taken when fossil fuel-intensive production and related employment opportunities are phased out.⁶⁸ If the distributional effects of the transition are perceived as unfair and regions and groups are left without the support needed to adapt to a new economic reality, social unrest may follow.⁶⁹ In fragile settings the side effects of renewable energy projects and local climate adaptation projects may heighten conflict risks.⁷⁰ At the global level the transition may reshape geopolitics, changing the relative positions of states and regions and leaving political and economic uncertainty.⁷¹ In addition, the growing demand for minerals in the wake of a low-carbon transition may exacerbate or spur new conflicts.⁷²

Digital technologies define new arenas for conflict

Chapter 3 highlights the threats to human security from digital technological innovation, which may also create new arenas where conflicts play out. The same technologies can provide new opportunities to ensure accountability and foster peace—through, for example, better forecasting of conflict risks⁷³—but military use of emerging technologies may also pose serious human security risks. For example, autonomous weapons systems and artificial intelligence may reduce human involvement in warfare,⁷⁴ raising questions about responsibility and accountability for the use of force. Existing regulatory and governance frameworks are ill-equipped to address the human rights risks linked to such emerging technologies.⁷⁵

Some digital technologies can facilitate illicit economic transactions and tax evasion, as they allow for anonymity and untraceable transactions.⁷⁶ Online sharing and storing of personal data expose individuals to risks ranging from identity fraud and theft to hate crimes, attacks and cyberbullying. Half of all internet users may be victims of a cybercrime.⁷⁷ Online hate speech disproportionately targets women and minority groups,⁷⁸ and online harassment can silence social activists and undermine public deliberation.⁷⁹ Although major social media platforms have policies for banning hateful conduct, regulatory frameworks are still lacking for the most part, implying much discretion by firms that already concentrate substantial economic power in arbitrating what is acceptable behaviour online and possibly making the internet yet another unsafe space for many people.

The algorithms that social media platforms use to promote content may create content clusters and spread misinformation that can drive polarization.⁸⁰ While some research points towards the potential of these arenas to spur radicalization and recruitment to extremist groups,⁸¹ the link between online hate and real-world violence and crime is yet to be fully established.⁸² For the victims of cyberviolence, however, sharply distinguishing between online and offline violence may not be useful, as online attacks incite fear and restrict people's freedoms, adversely impacting human security.

Large and growing inequalities mount tensions; conflict arenas differ across groups

Horizontal inequality has long been thought of as a key driver of conflict,⁸³ but the conflict-inequality link seems to be multidirectional, with horizontal inequality both shaping and being shaped by violence and conflict.⁸⁴ These interlinkages are important when group-level inequalities are tied to the systematic political, social and economic exclusion or discrimination of particular groups. Fault lines across groups can be mobilized by political actors or other interests for conflict and violence.⁸⁵ This should not be seen as an argument to curb civil liberties, given that the large majority of groups and social movements protesting discrimination, exclusion and inequalities use peaceful methods to make their voices

heard (box 4.2). Horizontal inequalities alone do not automatically trigger violent conflict; other channels are needed to translate horizontal inequality into violent action.

People's perception of inequality and injustice seems to be crucial in furthering conflict risks.⁸⁶ Groups perceiving inequalities as unfair are more likely to be mobilized to act and more prone to be sensitive to political leadership and narratives that stir up animosity aimed at triggering violence.⁸⁷ Horizontal inequality-driven conflict tensions compound the interaction with the potential harms of digital technology. As seen above, online content clusters and widespread misinformation can further exacerbate feelings of animosity and alienation.

Conflict affects groups and places differently and interplays with existing social and gender norms, attitudes and values. Men are more likely to be victims of violent crime and homicides and to be killed in battle. Yet men also make up 90 percent of homicide perpetrators worldwide and commit violent and sexual offences at much higher rates than women.⁸⁸ In warfare systematic sexual violence towards women remains an abhorrent human rights violation.⁸⁹ However, one of the most egregious yet widely tolerated violations of human security is violence against women and children within their households and in the community. About one in three women worldwide has been subject to physical and/or sexual violence, most often by an intimate partner.⁹⁰ Thus, the most dangerous place for many women across the globe may be their own home.

Conflicts are a growing public health concern

Armed conflict and violence not only pose direct threats to health but also interact with other human security threats to harm physical and mental well-being. Conflict may have long-term negative effects on important health determinants, such as household livelihoods and education. People living in conflict areas face compounding health risks. They are disproportionately affected by trauma and injuries as well as mental health problems, which may lead to long-term disabilities and chronic illness when ongoing violence reduces access to quality healthcare services.⁹¹ Conflict destroys healthcare infrastructure

Box 4.2 Social protests have intensified over the past three years

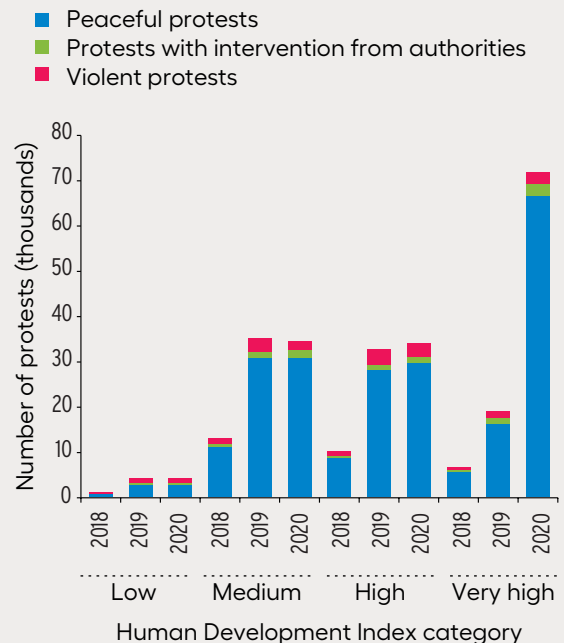
Over the past 10 years protests have been multiplying across the world, escalating in size and frequency. Largely peaceful, the growing scale and scope of protests are symptoms of human insecurity, revealing deep cleavages in societies and the failure of authorities to address citizen concerns.

Between 2009 and 2019 antigovernment protests increased by 11.5 percent a year on average, peaking in 2017 and 2019. In 2019 almost a quarter of the residents of both Hong Kong, China (SAR) and Santiago, Chile—2 million and 1.2 million people, respectively—took to the streets, and the social movement Fridays for Future registered more than 4 million environmental protests. These protests parallel declining trust in governments and democracy.¹ Protest is a form of political expression,² many times a final resort to seek social and political change when traditional mechanisms have not been responsive. While a protest may be triggered by a single event or policy change—such as the killing of George Floyd in the United States, the increases in metro fares in Chile or a proposed carbon tax in France—they often reflect mounting grievances, exclusion and discrimination.

The number of protest events has increased in all Human Development Index (HDI) categories over the past three years, with the largest increase in the very high HDI category (see figure). Rather than cooling tensions, the Covid-19 pandemic has spurred more protests across the world as people have taken to the streets to voice concerns about governments responses, or lack thereof, to the public health crisis.³ The vast majority of protests are peaceful, and only a small fraction turn violent or are met with intervention from authorities. How authorities meet demonstrations can affect whether they turn violent, and repression of nonviolent protests has been found to trigger further violence.⁴ When protests are

met with violence from authorities, human security is threatened, and human rights are violated.⁵

The number of protest events has increased in all Human Development Index categories over the past three years



Source: Human Development Report Office, based on Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

Source: Bell and Murdie 2018; Brannen, Haig and Schmidt 2020; EIU 2021; Ferreira and Schoch 2020; Fridays for Future 2021; Kishi 2021; Lipsky 1968; Pinckney 2016.

Notes

1. EIU 2021. **2.** Lipsky 1968. **3.** Kishi 2021. **4.** Pinckney 2016. **5.** In 2020 the United Nations Human Rights Committee adopted General Comment nr. 37 on the right to peaceful assembly (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2020).

and services, exacerbating people's vulnerability to trauma and diseases not directly related to fighting. Noncommunicable diseases may remain untreated, and conflict can increase stress and other risk factors.⁹²

These adverse health outcomes disproportionality affect already at-risk populations. For example, conflict is associated with increased gender-based and sexual violence directed towards women, higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases and worsening

maternal health outcomes.⁹³ Food insecurity is higher in conflict-affected areas, which may cause malnutrition and adverse health outcomes, especially among children.⁹⁴ Conflict and violence trigger displacement, further exposing people to health threats, which can be exacerbated when people live in close proximity, leading to contexts that are prone to outbreaks of life-threatening diseases such as cholera and malaria and that could become transmission belts for Covid-19.

“While a protest may be triggered by a single event or policy change—such as the killing of George Floyd in the United States, the increases in metro fares in Chile or a proposed carbon tax in France—they often reflect mounting grievances, exclusion and discrimination

Public health crises such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic may call for extraordinary policy measures and restrictions to protect people’s health.⁹⁵ If the measures are perceived as ineffective or unfair or fail to recognize adverse distributional effects, social and political tensions may increase. And while the pandemic dampened conflict events, in 2020 political violence rose in more countries than it fell.⁹⁶ Afghanistan, Mexico, Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine and Yemen experienced the most political violence that year, whereas Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Mali and Nigeria saw conflict events increase by more than 50 percent.⁹⁷

Putting people at the heart of conflict analysis, conflict prevention and sustaining peace shows the power of the human security approach

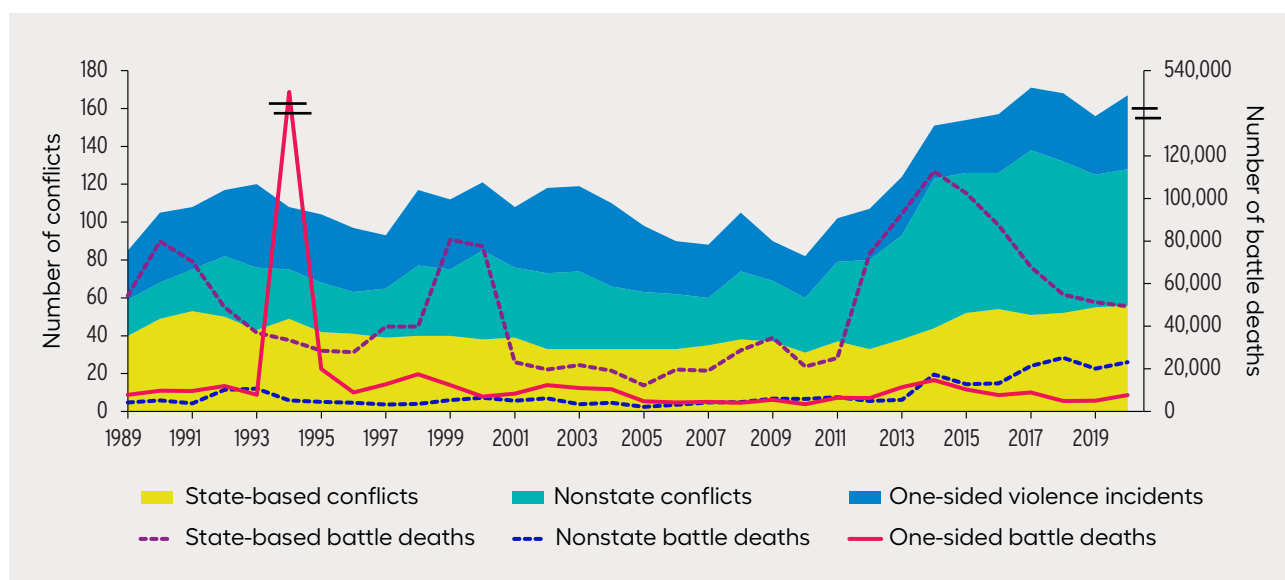
After decades of gradual de-escalation, conflict is again on the rise (figure 4.2). In 2020 there were 56

active state-based conflicts in 37 countries, the most involving the government of a state since the end of World War II.⁹⁸ Much of this increase may be ascribed to the Islamic State engaging in direct conflicts with governments in numerous countries. However, state-based wars are giving way to conflict between nonstate actors. In 2020, 72 active nonstate conflicts claimed the lives of 23,000 people. Together, both figures point towards violent conflicts that are less state-centric and increasingly protracted.⁹⁹

The conflicts of today tend to be less deadly than the wars prior to 1990. Now, most battle-related deaths are concentrated in a few countries. Furthermore, crime is now a greater source of violent deaths than armed conflicts, and most occur outside traditional conflict zones.¹⁰⁰ The Americas account for 40 percent of homicides, and homicide rates have remained high and stable in the region while declining in the rest of the world.¹⁰¹ Beyond homicides, people in Latin America are disproportionately exposed to other violent crimes.¹⁰²

Still, measuring and monitoring conflict are laden with political and technical challenges. Traditional conflict metrics, such as number of ongoing conflicts or battle-related deaths, do not fully capture the reach of armed conflicts today, nor do they give a complete picture of the scale of the human security implications of violent conflicts. With protracted conflicts

Figure 4.2 The number of violent conflicts is rising again



Source: Aas Rustad 2021a.

and organized crime simultaneously concentrating in subnational hotspots and spreading across borders, data and measurement innovations are needed to improve understanding of who is affected by conflict. Although there are fewer battle-related deaths than in the past, violent conflicts are now more protracted, lingering on for years. Violent conflict creates immense hardship and suffering, including physical injuries, mental health problems and trauma, sexual violence, and exploitation, as well as generalized fear and a breakdown of trust.

This Report introduces one innovation in measuring the number of people affected by conflict that reveals stark trends (box 4.3).¹⁰³ The number of people

living in proximity to conflict events has more than doubled since 1990, and the share of conflict-affected people has been growing rapidly as well. Today about 1.2 billion people live in conflict-affected areas, 560 million of them in countries not classified as fragile contexts.¹⁰⁴ In 2020 people in at least 25 countries not facing fragile contexts were living in proximity to conflict events. Between 2014 and 2020 the number of people living in conflict areas increased by 378 million, and 40 percent of them were outside fragile contexts. Since conventional conflict analysis and peacebuilding tend to focus on fragility, conflict-affected people outside of traditional conflict zones may be overlooked.

Box 4.3 Measuring conflict-affected populations

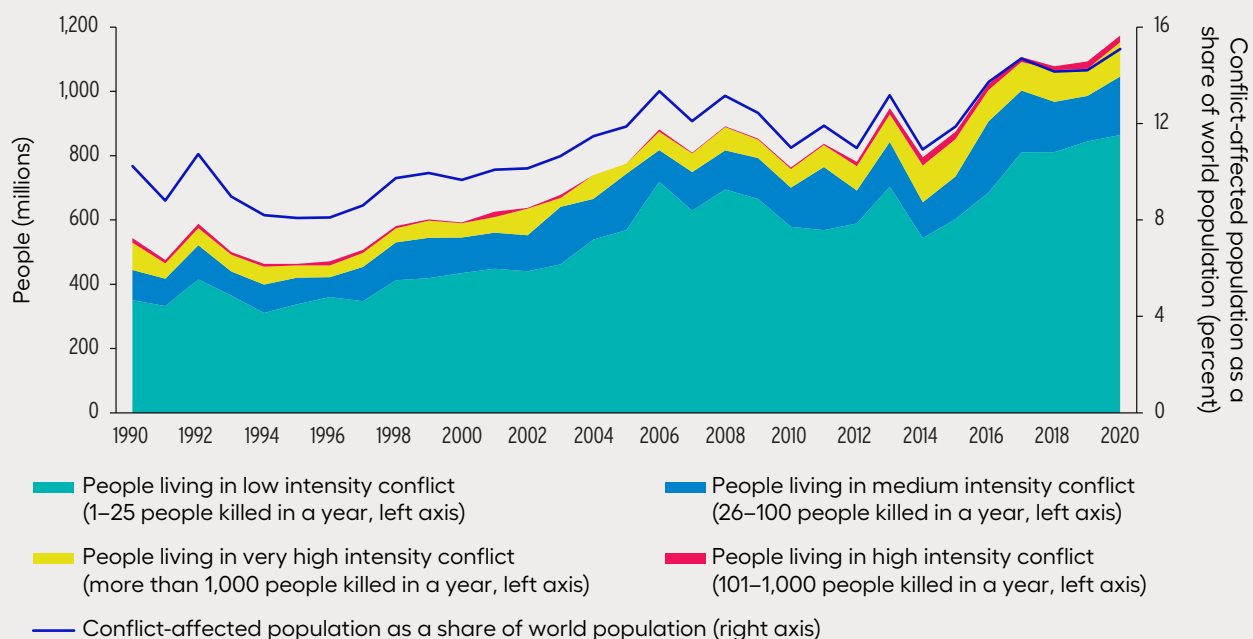
To scale the dimension of people exposed to conflict, Østby, Aas Rustad and Arasmith (2021) developed a methodology for calculating the number of people living in proximity to conflict. In 2020, 4.5 billion people lived in countries that saw some kind of conflict. Yet not all of those people were equally affected, as conflict events tend to concentrate in hotspots (box figure 1).

About 555 million people lived within 50 kilometres of a conflict event in 1990, compared with almost 1.2 billion—15

percent of the world's population—in 2020.¹ The trend is even more dramatic for children because conflicts are more common in countries with younger populations. Some 200 million children lived in conflict areas in 1990, compared with 452 million—19 percent of all children—in 2020. About 73 percent (864 million) of conflict-affected people live in areas with low levels of conflict (1–25 people killed a year). But even living in low intensity conflict areas can have a big impact on people's lives.

(continued)

Box figure 1 Number of people within 50 kilometres of fighting



Note: The number of people living in conflict affected areas, where fighting takes place within a 50 kilometre radius.

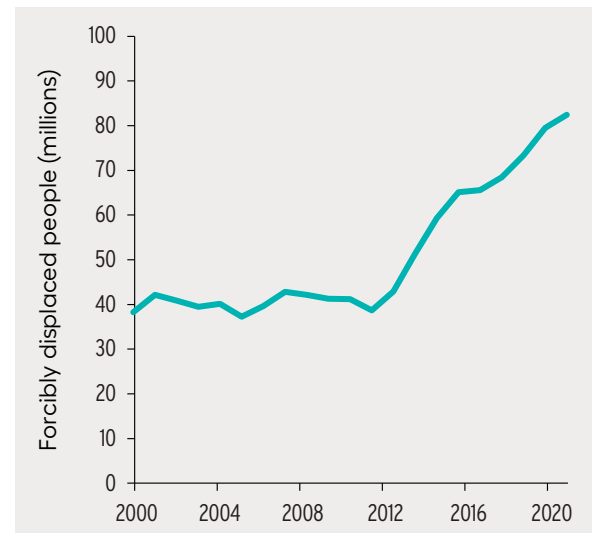
Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset v.20.1; UN World Population Estimates; Østby, Aas Rustad and Tollefsen 2020.

Living in a conflict-affected area and being exposed to violence, directly or indirectly, have negative effects on important human development outcomes.¹⁰⁵ A reduced sense of safety and adverse mental health are common in communities with recurring violent events.¹⁰⁶ For example, a surge in local homicides in Bogotá, Colombia, increased mental health disorders and posttraumatic stress disorder among adolescents, including those without direct exposure to violence.¹⁰⁷

“Today about 1.2 billion people live in conflict-affected areas, 560 million of them in countries not classified as fragile contexts

Violence and fear of violence push people to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. The number of forcibly displaced people has been growing—peaking at 82.4 million in 2020 (figure 4.3).¹⁰⁸ Chapter 5 illustrates the multiple human security threats that forcibly displaced people face. While the conflicts in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syrian Arab Republic are thought to be responsible for more than half the world’s refugee population, overlapping human security threats, conflict and violence drive displacement outside war zones. Unprecedented violence,

Figure 4.3 The number of forcibly displaced people is at a record high



Note: The global number of forcibly displaced people is recorded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in its Refugee Data Finder. It includes data from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East on Palestine refugees under its mandate and data on internally displaced people from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. See UNHCR (2021d).

Source: Human Development Report Office based on UNHCR (2020).

widespread criminality and impunity threaten citizen security in Central America and drive people from their homes in the Northern Triangle countries.¹⁰⁹

Box 4.3 Measuring conflict-affected populations (continued)

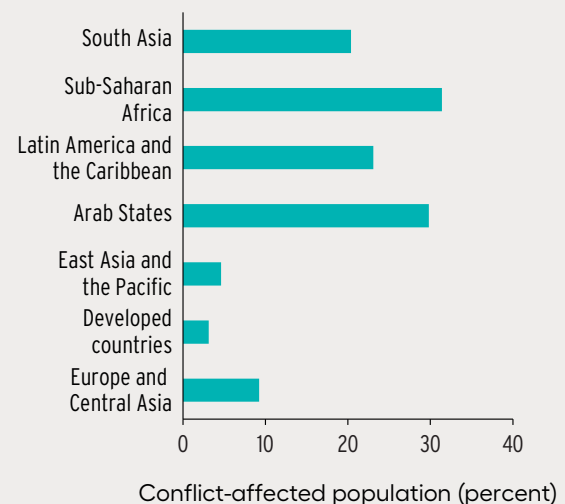
South Asia has the highest number of people affected by conflict; however, in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East around 30 percent of the total population live in conflict (box figure 2). In the mid-2000s the conflict-affected population in Sub-Saharan Africa rose sharply as a result of large increases in nonstate conflicts. The Arab countries show an increase after 2011, coinciding with the post-Arab Spring period, particularly in Iraq, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Around 2016 there was an increase in Latin America, due mainly to violence related to nonstate conflict between drug cartels in Brazil and Mexico.

Source: Østby, Aas Rustad and Arasmith 2021; Østby, Aas Rustad and Tollefsen 2020; Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset v.20.1; UN World Population Estimates.

Note

1. A conflict event is defined as “An incident where armed force was used by an organised actor against another organized actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least one direct death at a specific location and a specific date” (Aas Rustad 2021a).

Box figure 2 Africa and in the Middle East have the largest share of people living in conflict



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset v.20.1; UN World Population Estimates; Østby, Aas Rustad and Tollefsen 2020.

Box 4.4 Everyday Peace Indicators

Research by the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) project shows how villages and neighbourhoods around the world perceive peace and peace-related concepts, such as coexistence, security and justice. The findings: everyday people raise concerns vastly different from top-down measures of conflict and peace, hinting at the blindspots of conventional security policies that make sustaining peace in the long term so difficult.

Traditional indicators such as conflict deaths and other conflict events are important to understand macro-level trends, but they may not adequately represent the priorities of those living in, or affected by, conflicts. For example, based on data from 1,500 people in 18 rural villages in eastern Afghanistan, EPI researchers found that roadblocks (commonly raised by insurgent groups

to extort travellers) were indicators of insecurity and conflict.¹ But the ability to access public services or the visibility of women and girls in public spaces, such as the market, indicated reduced conflict. In Colombia the re-emergence of the local market and trade in San Jose de Uruma in northeastern Antioquia, previously hit hard by internal armed conflict, marked a transition towards peace, whereas the EPI researchers argue that piling up of trash on the streets may indicate a deteriorating situation.²

Source: Firchow 2018; Firchow and Urwin 2020; Vera-Adrianzén and others 2020.

Note

1. Firchow and Urwing 2020. **2.** Vera-Adrianzen and others 2020.

Internal displacement is also a growing concern, especially in relation to climate change and environmental degradation.¹¹⁰

“Fear of violence may reduce people’s mobility, dictate how they move in public space and reduce their participation in community activities

Yet, fear of violence may also reduce people’s mobility, dictate how they move in public space and reduce their participation in community activities.¹¹¹ This seems to hold true even in areas where measured conflict, violence and crime are low,¹¹² showing how insecurity, both measured and perceived, can shape behaviour, hamper wellbeing and curtail agency. As chapter 1 mentions, human insecurity is present across all HDI categories. Furthermore, the feeling of insecurity has been growing over time, with the largest increases in very high HDI countries. Crime, violence and terrorism is the second most cited risk to personal safety in the latest World Risk Poll,¹¹³ and more than 60 percent of people

worldwide are worried about sustaining serious harm from violent crime.¹¹⁴

Going beyond the traditional conflict metrics to centre the analysis on people, rather than on the contestations, illustrates the power of using a human security approach. It shows how violent conflict increasingly affects people outside traditional conflict zones, who may be overlooked when the focus is where fighting takes place. It also identifies how conflict is not only a threat to physical safety but may also raise barriers to trust, solidarity, agency and empowerment—key principles needed to face the new generation of human security threats. People-centred conflict analysis puts people at the heart of conflict prevention and shifts attention towards empowering people to become change-agents for peace. Systematic work to source locally defined indicators of conflict and peace may amplify the voices of those living in conflict (box 4.4). Other approaches include measuring the effectiveness of peace operations on the lives of people, as well as on institutions.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, conflict, violence and peace are felt, experienced and constructed by people.